



MURDIE IN HALRUAA



a fantasy mystery by

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Edgar Award Nominee

Forgotten Realms

The Mysteries: Murder in Halruaa

By Richard Meyer

CHAPTER ONE

Double-Edged Blade

Pryce Covington knew he was in real trouble when he saw the second corpse.

This is not to say that he was happy when he saw the first corpse. Far from it. Exactly the opposite, in fact. His heart sank like an egg in a mug of ale, and with it vanished his fondest wish. But of all the words he thought of at that moment—"no," "it's not fair," and "just my luck," among others—the word "trouble" did not come up.

The specter of personal danger arose only when he saw the second dead body. At first glance, it seemed far less distressful than the first corpse. The youthful man with an unlined face was sitting placidly on the grassy ground, leaning against a tree trunk, his expression almost bemused. Not like the first.

No, not anything like the first body. The face of the first corpse was disturbing, to say the least, even in the pleasant rays of sunrise: eyes protruding; tongue swollen and stiff and hanging as far out of its mouth as it could go; and the visible skin a puffy, horrid

shade of purple-green. Well, that's what happens when you hang from a branch with a rope noose around your neck, no matter how handsome you were when your heart was beating and your brain was working.

Pryce Covington felt his legs wobble, and a mist drifted across his mind's eye, a mourning mist that had nothing to do with the morning dew. "Stop it," he told himself firmly. "You're not a weakling." The sight of two dead bodies wasn't terribly unusual, but the reality of the scene was more potent than he could have anticipated.

"Stop it," he repeated to himself. He lived in a rough-hewn world where confrontation was commonplace. How many

fight had he seen? Too many. Hugely muscled men, solidly built dwarves, capable and cunning gnomes, all brandishing bladed weapons, smacking them into each other like snorting minotaurs in a gladiatorial ring.

But then he realized that "seen" was the key word. Pryce Covington had witnessed numerous fights, but he never got involved in them himself. Covington would sooner do just about anything than actually exchange blows.

Pryce noticed that he was having trouble swallowing, but at least—unlike his ex-colleague, Gamor Turkal—he could still do it. Poor Gamor, he thought, staring at his ex-associate's toes, which swung slowly before his eyes. Then, totally against his will, the words metamorphosed in his brain into "poor Pryce."

Defensive rationalization rushed forward to soothe his addled mind.

At least Gamor was free from any possible misery, he thought. Gamor was lucky; he was dead. Now only poor, pitiful Pryce Covington was left to stand there and try to figure out what had happened.

What's the big deal? Pryce chastised himself, trying to get over the trauma of it all. It was only death... death, the one mystery everyone would eventually solve. Pryce had seen ghosts

before... well, at least he had talked to people who said they had seen them. And maybe that was a ghost he had seen drifting through the ruins that lined the east side of Lallor Strait, which he had passed on the way to this rendezvous outside the wall of Lallor, Halruaa's most exclusive, least-explored city.

Pryce quickly dismissed any thought of Lallor or Halruaa from his mind. The important thing now was Gamor Turkal, plus whoever this other dead fellow was. He couldn't do that if he let his emotions run away from him.

To counter his disturbed frame of mind, he became scrupulously logical. There were ghosts, he decided firmly,

and ghosts were a clear sign there was at least some sort of life after death. So what was so terrible about finding his ex-associate and some stranger dead? Be fair, he insisted to himself.

Suddenly the words his father had spoken years earlier came back to him as clearly as when they were first spoken: "Farewell, my boy. I ask only three things of you, if you would honor the man who gave you life. Be strong, be smart, and be serene. This is all the advice I can give you, Pryce, but if you achieve all three, it will be all you will ever need____"

Pryce shook his head angrily, blinking furiously. Curse his father, curse his father's desertion of his family, curse his father for infiltrating his thoughts, and curse this damp morning air. Beads of water had formed around his eyes. Pryce used the back of his arm to wipe his face dry. Then he tried once more to control himself.

Concentrate, he thought, closing his eyes. Concentrate on what you know. And, as so often happened whenever Pryce Covington concentrated, what he knew tumbled to the fore from his subconscious in the form of gambling odds.

Okay... the odds of trouble resulting from reporting Turkal's death seemed relatively small. Pryce knew enough about his associate, and Pryce's own relationship with him, to talk his way around any number of rude discoveries. But the odds of avoiding

trouble when reporting the stranger's death were decidedly less favorable. There was simply too much Pryce didn't know.

This much he did know: At this moment, he stood in the shadow of an impressive twenty-foot-high wall that surrounded the city of Lallor. The wall seemed to be made of shimmering boulders that appeared to be wet. Looking closely, Pryce noted that the boulders interlocked cleverly. Unless someone stood on the very top of the wall, Pryce and his grim companions were totally out of any city dweller's sight. From where he stood, Pryce could barely see the

esoteric tops of buildings, but he saw no telltale window from which he could be seen.

Not far from the wall stood a most extraordinary tree, a magnificent mass of barkless, smooth, almost shiny wood, rooted in a grassy incline that led up to the wall's base. Somehow, perhaps with human assistance, the tree had grown into the bent form of a giant question mark. Against its base leaned one dead man. From the very end of its questioning curl hung another, with a rope noose tightened around his thin neck, which had now grown decidedly thinner.

Pryce Covington finally lost the battle with his weakening legs. His knees buckled and he dropped to the ground, his knuckles brushing against the grass. "Gamor, why?" he moaned miserably. "Why did you have to go and die before —" Mercifully, he left the rest of the sentence unspoken, but it echoed in his mind regardless: —before telling me about the cushy job for life you promised me!

A cushy job was all Pryce Covington had ever wanted. From the moment he was born, in the tiny city of Merrickarta in the basin surrounded by the northern mountain ranges, to this very moment, he had made no secret of his heart's desire. In fact, it was almost impossible to converse with him for more than two

mugs of ale without the subject arising. Serving wenches from one end of the Nath to the other could practically sing it in harmony: "All I want is a cushy job for life. Is that so much to ask?"

Nothing less could have lured him from his life of desperate certainty to this land of promised opportunity. It's not my fault, he thought. What else could I do? He had been lying in his comfortable Merrickarta hovel, minding his own business, when Gamor Turkal's handsome face had suddenly swum into view. His appearance reminded Pryce of dust motes suddenly taking form in a shaft of sunlight.

"Pryce," the dusty face said.

"Gamor?"

"You must come to Lallor, Pryce." "Lallor?"

"Yes, Lallor!" the face had exclaimed. "Are you an echo or something?"

Not one to look dust faces in the mouth, Covington's interest had been piqued, despite the incongruity of his business associate appearing to him in such a bizarre fashion. But he wasn't about to journey more than two hundred miles to the southwest without learning more. "Why should I come to Lallor, Gamor?"

"Make up your mind, Pryce. Do you think I can maintain this connection forever?"

"And do you think I'm going to accept the word of a handful of talking dust? If you're really Gamor Turkal, you know me better than that!"

"And if you're truly Pryce Covington, you will meet me at the Mark of the Question," the face countered, and then it uttered the magic words, the oft-wished-for, never attained, always-sought-after "cushy job for life." But before Pryce could grill the dusty apparition on the particulars, the face had suddenly disappeared and spread across the hovel floor like gritty glitter.

It wasn't until he was about fifty miles southwest of Merrickarta that Pryce began to wonder how Gamor had achieved

that interesting effect. Turkal had always had a dramatic flair, but hitherto he had shown little interest in magic, although he wasn't vehemently against it as Pryce was.

'You know what magic is? Real magic?' he had often lectured Gamor. "I'll tell you what magic is. It's a way for powerless people to win arguments."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Certainly," Pryce said, letting an electrum coin play across his knuckles. "People who feel powerless learn magic in order to lord it over the rest of us."

"Not like you," Gamor laughed, noting Pryce's knack of keeping the coin moving without grasping it.

"My tricks are honest prestidigitation," Pryce maintained. "Sleight of hand. People who use magic are cheats. They use sleight of mind...."

"What's with you, Pryce?" his comrade whined. "Was your mother scared by a wizard when you were a baby?"

Pryce's eyes had narrowed and the smile had left his face suddenly. "Mark my words, Gamor," he said evenly, suddenly snapping the coin out of the air. "I wouldn't learn magic if every mage within a day's ride went down on his knobby knees and begged me." Then he slowly opened his hand, finger by finger, to reveal that the coin was no longer there.

Gamor had shrugged, unimpressed. "Not much chance of that." It was true. Although they came into frequent contact with magicians, the young partners were regarded as nothing more than glorified messengers.

"Ah, but what messengers!" Pryce had always countered when a comely maid sneered at his current profession. Pryce had tried many occupations following his father's departure for places unknown, but none had suited his peculiar temperament.

At the age of eight, he tried his hand at acting, and he was fairly good at it, but he hated having an audience. They were always analyzing his performance rather than accepting his char-

acter. They were passing judgment, not really listening. Pryce didn't know why, but that galled him. At the age of twelve, he had considered trying for a mage apprenticeship, but the very idea gave him gooseflesh.

Finally, at the age of fifteen, he had sat down and tried to think of the perfect job—one that would make use of his youth, his relatively pleasant countenance, his wit, and his ego. Thus was born Pryce Covington, man of service. He set a sign out in the single window of the hovel he had shared with his mother until her recent death:

Nothing too serious, Nothing too fun; I will do
What must be done.

It had started slowly, of course. He had slopped out his share of pigpens—both human and animal—but soon all manner of creatures were calling upon him for all manner of tasks. Whenever anyone needed two extra hands to move a shipment, two extra feet to run an errand, or extra eyes to witness a transaction, an extra nose to sniff out information, and extra ears to objectively consider a problem that had become too subjective, Pryce Covington was there.

Soon he needed more arms, legs, eyes, ears, and an extra nose, which was where his tavern mate Gamor Turkal had come in. Gamor was lazy, but he had a spectacular memory. He was a bit too cagey for his own good, but always looking for an edge had its upside as well.

He was perfect for some jobs Pryce wished to avoid and dreadful for assignments Pryce specialized in—in other words, the very definition of a perfect partner: a person with mutually inclusive neuroses who would always make you look good and never threaten your position.

They had made a pretty Skie, not to mention a goodly number of other Halruan coins, but things started to get out of hand when they stumbled upon a new form of highly lucrative assignment. It consisted of running to see if magically transmitted messages sent by mages had arrived without interference from outside sorcerers.

Pryce had insisted on doing all of the initial runs himself and, out of sheer obstinacy, had bartered the fee to a new high. The idea that magic was so vulnerable that he had to "chaperon" it appealed to him immensely, and so he set the price accordingly. If the magicians were going to admit their magic was fallible to someone as common as he, then his silence on the same point was going to cost them!

Even though his services were discreet, word of his abilities as a messenger started to spread, and soon nearly every insecure magician and mage-in-training in the area was

offering him sacks of electrum to discreetly make sure that his spells were working. So many assignments were coming in that before long Pryce had to entrust Gamor with some of them.

It had certainly kept Pryce and Gamor hopping, but when they weren't too exhausted they had more than enough coins to make any evening a night they had a hard time remembering the next morning. Unfortunately Gamor had quickly tired of the shortage of loafing time. One morning he announced his imminent departure for less green pastures, and by that afternoon he was gone.

Pryce was just getting used to his former partner's traumatic exit when the dust unsettled, in a manner of speaking, and he was summoned to Lallor by the ghostly image of Gamor Turkal.

The first raindrop outside the city wall fell on Pryce's jacket like a tap on the shoulder from the gods. It effectively brought

him out of his reverie of self-pity. He looked up to see storm clouds gathering.

Oh, great, he thought. That's what I get for placing my faith in anything... or anyone. But even as the thought formed, Pryce chided himself. Gamor's job offer had been too promising to ignore. So now, whatever it was he had gotten into, he had only himself to blame.

A second raindrop hit him right between the eyes. That did it. His brain immediately clicked into practical mode. The pure, clear rain started tapping him all over his body as he took stock of himself.

His clothes had weathered the long journey from Merrickarta rather well. The light gray tunic, woven from the sturdy silk of worms found only in the dying leaves of fallen trees at the base of Mount Alue, remained soft and warm from his chin to his hips. The dark red vest, made of cloth from the famed dye works of Achelar, added further warmth. The thick black

pants and waterproof boots disguised a myriad of stains. His dark, stylish jacket concealed numerous hidden pockets, from its high collar to its midlength. The pockets were filled with his remaining savings. The outfit had served him well throughout the long trip, yet its only reward upon arrival was the promise of a thorough soaking.

Almost as if the forces of nature agreed with his gloomy assessment, a biting, piercing wind suddenly coursed over the lush green incline. Covington shivered as the limb of the tree above him shook, making the lifeless body of Gamor Turkal seem to nod at the miserable, newly-arrived messenger from the north. It was as if Gamor were saying, from beyond the grave, "That's what you get for seeking a cushy job for life!"

"Don't gloat," Pryce muttered, trying vainly to protect his ears with his jacket collar.

The bending tree answered with a groan, and the rain began to slash, slicing down at an angle as the winds added their own

moaning voice. Odd, Pryce thought. This was surprisingly chilly weather for early autumn in southern Halruaa. He turned and looked back toward the road he had followed to arrive at this disastrous rendezvous.

Only five minutes or so back to the road, he judged, then another ten or fifteen to reach the Lallor Gate. If he could gain entrance to the city, maybe he could find some simple place that was warm, dry, and affordable, considering the meager savings he had brought with him. Once his wits returned to full strength, he could consider his options.

Why not? he asked himself. Although Gamor was dead, somewhere within the city walls, a cushy job for life awaited him, and if anyone could find it, it was Pryce Covington. That's what Gamor would have wanted, he thought. After all, that's why his old tavern mate and short-lived business associate had summoned him in the first place! Surely Gamor would have wanted Pryce to have the occupation of

his dreams. Absolutely!

Pryce squared his shoulders and started to march away. He hadn't gotten ten paces when the wind began to howl with renewed force and it began to rain even harder. He bent his head down and tried to make headway against the raging wind. His pace grew slower, and soon he was panting against the Lallor Wall.

He realized that this sudden storm would give him some sort of respiratory illness if he walked through it for more than five minutes. It seemed yet another oppressive sign, but he vowed that it would not defeat him. Instead, Pryce reluctantly returned to the relative shelter of the tree. He stood beneath its wildly trembling branches, scanning the sky for any sign of a break in the weather.

But every time he thought he saw some sun, Gamor's body would swing into view. Turkal's horrible head, now dripping wet, seemed to mock him by sticking out its tongue and making bulging-eyed faces. Pryce turned away, only to find himself staring into the face of the dead stranger. Much to his own surprise,

Covington no longer felt queasy or emotional. Instead, he was suddenly and strangely certain. The face of the unknown dead man presented a hidden problem, and Pryce was determined to solve it. Past experience had taught him how to read faces.

The unknown man's face held indications of education and intelligence in its muscle patterns. Stupid or ignorant people looked different, even in death. This man's hairline was high, the hair short and so waxen it was almost clear. The skin was reasonably taut, neither so lined that it silently spoke of manual labor nor so smooth that it told of an idle life. From what Pryce could see, this person had won the biological sweepstakes. The lack of excess fat and strength of the neck spoke of good family stock and an occupation that maintained health.

That information wasn't enough. Covington was convinced

he was missing something obvious, and he knew he would have to investigate further. He knelt by the body and studied it thoughtfully.

Look into the dead man's eyes, Pryce finally thought, surprising himself. Why the eyes? The eyes are the window of the soul, not to mention the pockets of the face. He would see what lay hidden inside visually, much in the same way he might go through the man's actual pockets physically. But first he would have to open the man's closed eyelids.

Covington's fingers touched the smooth, dry skin. He pressed his thumb lightly on the eyelid, feeling the eye beneath. He realized that he was holding his breath. Then he finally realized what had interested him about the man's face. His fingers stiffened, motionless, on the dry skin.

Pryce's head whirled around to look up at Gamor, still swinging in the wind. Rain was streaming from his body. Covington looked down at himself. His own clothes and, more importantly, his own skin were soaked. He looked back at the stranger. The stranger's head was as dry as a creditor's smile.

That's when Pryce Covington finally noticed the cloak.

It was beautiful in a simple, deceptive way. From a distance of even a few feet, it looked so natural it was almost invisible, even though it reached from the top of the seated body's head to the knees. Pryce could see that the hood, when folded back, would lie flat on the cape, adding to its timeless styling.

The cloak itself was a dusky blend of dark colors, like the sky just after sunset. Pryce could distinguish some blue, some black, and even some purple, interwoven with flecks that could be compared to stars just coming to life as daylight fled. Around the edges, it seemed to turn gray, like the promise of a new world just over the horizon.

The cloak may have been wet, but it was so sturdily stitched that it kept its wearer perfectly dry, unlike the outfits of Pryce and the late Gamor Turkal.

Pryce was surprised by his reaction to what first appeared to be a simple piece of clothing, but that was the kind of response this cloak elicited. Yet this was nothing compared to the clasp that held it in place. The circular clasp, which could not have been more than two and a half inches around at most, was one of the most ornate metalworking jobs Pryce had ever seen. Glimpsed superficially, it looked like a standard circular clasp with some sort of vine design, but upon closer examination, it looked like a cross-section of dense forest... like looking deep into a briar patch.

Pryce ran his finger over the clasp. It felt smooth and cool to the touch. It seemed to draw his finger in an interesting pattern: first down, then around and up to the top left, then back right and down around twice more to the bottom left. Fascinating.

Just as he began to raise his finger from the metal circle, the clasp sprang open and the cloak fell open.

Pryce sprawled backward in surprise, landing on his seat in a mud puddle. He was on his feet immediately, as if he had accidentally sat on a baby. He felt the mud through the thick cloth of his pants and grimaced at the mess. He quickly wiped himself off

as best he could and even leaned his bottom out from under the branches to get a quick rinse in the rain.

He really needed the dead man's cloak, he decided, both to keep dry and to cover any stain that might have been left on his trousers. There's nothing more impressive to city gatekeepers than a stranger who has seemingly soiled himself.

Later, Pryce would rationalize that his "accident" was what had made him "borrow" the cloak, but secretly he knew that he had wanted it almost as soon as he had examined it. It was as if it had been waiting for him all his life. Still, it took him more than a few moments to convince himself that he should steal from a corpse.

Utter practicality won the day. The corpse didn't need to

stay dry. It made no difference to the corpse. The living had precedence. Right? Right.

Pryce almost shivered with delight as the cloak settled over him. Not only was the rain suddenly shut out, but a wonderful warmth, the deepness of which he hadn't known on his entire journey, settled over him. What is this marvelous garment made of? he wondered, but any further inquiries were ignored as a new sense of purpose gripped him.

With this cloak to protect him, it was time to move on. A cushy job for life beckoned from somewhere inside the city's walls, and Pryce Covington didn't want to miss it. Silently he thanked the cloak's former owner, then took a resolute stride out from under the oddly shaped tree.

He studiously avoided looking back up at his ex-partner, determining instead to think only of good feelings and the hale and hearty promise made to him. "Come to Lallor, Pryce," the vision of Gamor had said. "It's the secret jewel of Halruaa, where every creature of every sort is accepted and feels perfectly at home—"

Home, Pryce thought. His strides became longer and more purposeful, the rain a distant memory outside the protection of his new cloak.

Ever since his mother had died, Pryce had had a nagging feeling that Merrickarta was not his true home. The place where he would feel at peace was somewhere away from the Nath ... perhaps where he would find his father again ... but for now, Lallor seemed most promising.

"It is a shining region," Gamor had declared with a grin. Pryce smiled inwardly at the memory of that grin—the knowing, wicked grin that always signaled to Pryce that Turkal only thought he knew what he was talking about. The kind of grin that made empty but large promises that the hapless conniver then scrambled to justify... and sometimes even to make come true.

Pryce remembered the time when Gamor had promised that

the lovely Benetarian twins awaited them at the Chomp 'n' Choke Tavern upon the completion of their latest message check for a wizard named Petarius.

"Absurd!" Pryce had countered. "First of all, the likes of Victoria and Rebecca Benetarian wouldn't be caught comatose in a hole like the Chomp 'n' Choke. Secondly, why would such beauties require the company of two prospectless suitors such as you and I?"

But Gamor's wicked grin had only grown more wicked, so Pryce had allowed his hopes to rise as they raced to check the successful communication of a recipe spell. When they finally returned to the Chomp 'n' Choke, they found Petarius's two apprentices wooing the twins in a back booth. The ladies sarcastically thanked Gamor for pointing out the location of a boite so discreet that no associate of the disapproving Petarius would ever see them there. Then, after Gamor had sardonically suggested he might mention the situation to the apprentices' master, they laughed and maintained that any tale such a lowly messenger told the wizard would be interpreted by the arrogant mage as an envious lie to discredit his honorable students.

Pryce had watched as Gamor was thrown from the pub once, twice, three times, assisted by a combination of fists, boots, and ejection spells. He watched the first two times as Turkal landed on his back and side respectively, but he turned away when his partner landed on his head. Then Pryce shook his own head from side to side as his battered associate got up on wobbly legs, dusted himself off, then zigzagged shakily back into the establishment.

When he came out again, he was on his own two feet and carrying an intricately curved bottle of deep turquoise. "Let's go drown our sorrows," he said.

"But that's a bottle of the finest Maerbian wine!" Pryce exclaimed. "How could you afford that?" His eyes narrowed. "Did you spend all our money?"

"I did not," the bloodied but unbowed Turkal had replied

with offended pride. "I went right back in there, marched up to the back booth, and stuck my hand out. They say that the better man should win,' I told them, 'and in this case, it is obviously true. I should have known better than to trifle with the likes of Petarian-educated gentlemen and well-bred, high-minded Mer-rickartian ladies. Please allow me to show you that I have learned my lesson and that there are no hard feelings.'"

"You didn't," Pryce said.

"I did," Gamor replied. "I marched right up to the bar and said, 'A round for my friends and a round for the house. The apprentices of the great magician Petarius want to show the realm what a fine, talented, altruistic, charitable man their master is!'"

Pryce started to laugh. "Why didn't you just tell the bartender they would pay and then wave to them so they'd wave back?"

"They might have known about that trick!" Gamor exclaimed. 'Think about it. What could they do? Cry out 'Oh, no' so that every laggard in town would hear them insult their own master? Besides, this way they won't have time to dally with the treacherous, teasing twins... not with the lowest life this side of the Nath pounding them on the back every other moment. Now let's get

out of here before they're able to make their way through all those drunken thank-yous and restraining hands!"

Then off the two ran ... into the mists of Pryce's memory. Covington allowed them to disappear into the distance of his mind's eye, then reluctantly permitted his concentration to return to the unfortunate matter at hand. He slowed, then stopped on the thick green, grassy incline outside the city wall.

Pryce turned as the first rumble of thunder rolled across the sky. In a crack of lightning, he saw his associate, Gamor Turkal, swinging from the end of a long, wet, tightly knotted rope, his boots six feet off the ground.

Curse this rain, Pryce thought. It made vision very difficult. For the second time that afternoon, he wiped beads of water from around his eyes. Some cunning thief he was! He couldn't get twenty paces without letting his emotions get the better of him. Gamor may have been a womanizing, self-important rascal, but he had also been a predictable business associate and sometimes even a friend.

Turkal's present position, however, had become too much for Pryce to bear. So Covington undertook an even worse transgression than stealing a cloak and leaving an apparent crime scene. He set about altering that crime scene.

Pryce couldn't just leave his ex-partner swinging at the end of a knotted rope. Ignoring the storm, Covington shimmied up the tree to lay his old pal, Gamor Turkal, to rest.

CHAPTER TWO

Pryce of Admission

The sudden, violent storm had ended by the time Pryce Covington reached the end of the long line of people waiting outside the Lallor Gate. He stood on the opposite side of the road, surveying the setup.

The line outside the gate was actually two lines: one very short, along a beautifully paved rock roadway; and one very long, in a muddy pathway that looked more like a narrow ditch, created by decades of hopeful immigrants desperate for an opportunity to prove their worth to the founding fathers of this bay-side retreat.

The two roads ran parallel, nestled between a cunningly constructed landscape, obviously designed for both beauty and security. Although greenery and foliage were much in evidence, the plants were trimmed low, so no lines of sight were obscured. Only narrow blooms and shrubbery were planted, so there were no real hiding places for any thief or attacker to use as cover.

Standing amid the carefully tended plants and flowers, Pryce

considered the two roads that led to the Lallor Gate. He saw

that the paved road was similar to the wall that surrounded the city, in that it seemed to be constructed of interlocking stones, only these were a good deal smaller and more jewel-like than those used in the wall. Perhaps Gamor hadn't been exaggerating when he called Lallor the jewel of Halruaa!

No, Pryce thought, it couldn't be. These couldn't be dull, uncut gemstones! If they were, the magic protecting them must have been prodigious. Besides, why tempt every thief from the seaport of Githim in the south to the Bandit Wastes hundreds of miles to the north? Even if they weren't actual jewels, it was an impressive entry path for those wealthy or powerful enough to use it.

Pryce's eyes narrowed as he looked up at the wall, then down the divided road to the Lallor Gate. Even from this distance, the gate was obviously a magnificent construction. The woodworking was exquisite and seemed to shine in places, as if the logs were mortared with silver and gold. Pryce's eyes narrowed even more as he tried to make out a subtle design amongst the interweaving vines and bark.

Suddenly, incredibly, a large eye opened at the very top of the gate. It had to be twenty feet across, stretching from one side of the gate opening to the other. The pupil was as black as darkest night, the white as milky as the stars in the sky. But between the two was an oval that changed color from brown to blue to green in rapid succession.

At first Pryce Covington thought the giant eye was looking straight through him, but soon he realized that it was following the progress of a newcomer who had been granted entry to the city. It watched carefully as the man slowly hurried... that is, the man was clearly in a hurry to make his way inside Lallor, but careful not to show the witnessing eye any disrespect. He was actually hurrying slowly.

Pryce made a face like a frog, his lips stretching as far down as

they could go on either side. Then his mouth bounced back to its natural mildly pleasant expression, and he made his

way nonchalantly across the gemstone road to the line of refugees. He trudged to take up his position behind the last person in line, careful not to jostle or disturb him.

After all, suspicion of outsiders was commonplace in Halruaa. It was a rich nation and quite exclusive. Having faced invasions on a regular basis from jealous outsiders, Halruans had become cautious by nature. Pryce appreciated this and tried to be as considerate as his ego would let him. Cautiously avoiding puddles, he waited at the very end of the long line, deciding that the wait was probably a good thing. It would give him time to figure out what he was going to do.

More of his father's words reached him through the murk of his memory. "Every day is another play," he recalled with remarkable clarity. "Think of your life as a comedy-drama with you as the hero. Prepare yourself for every eventuality as if your god were a master playwright. Then comport yourself as you would want your hero to behave. Be the star of your own life!" For an abandoning scoundrel who had left him next to nothing, Pryce's father had managed to tell his only son a lot of useful things.

Pryce shrugged off the memory. He had two dead bodies to worry about, which had complicated his life more than anything he had previously experienced. Even so, he decided that he had come too far to stop now. After all, he had already torn up his Merrickartian roots to travel hundreds of miles down the Nath, past Lake Maeru, over the River Maeru, to the dangerous Lallor Pass. It was a tiny strip of serviceable land wedged between the undead-riddled ruins of the Zalasuu-Assundath Swamp, the monster-infested mountains of the Zhal Strip, and the bandit-filled desert of the Lower Swagdar outlaw wastes.

Even if he had wanted to return after experiencing the rendezvous-gone-wrong, he wasn't going to tempt fate twice by trying his luck in the pass again. No, better to wait and take his

chances in Lallor. The question now was to tell or not to tell? The odds favored the fact that Gamor was already well established within these walls. How else could he have acquired the magic necessary to contact Pryce with a talking face of dust? Why else would he have promised Pryce a cushy job for life? Besides, the owner of the cloak Pryce now wore was probably a quite successful individual, if his subtle yet impressive garments were any evidence.

Maybe Pryce wouldn't have to risk revealing the fates of his former partner and his unknown companion. Maybe someone inside the city would report them missing. That made good sense, given what he knew about Lallor. The Lallor inquisitrixes prided themselves on their security. Only the finest law-enforcing inquisitrixes could work in Lallor, and that was only after many years of service and extensive biyearly tests. Naturally they would want to secure their jobs by being as efficient as humanly possible. That meant letting no missing person remain missing for long.

A search would eventually have to turn up the bodies, and then Covington could take his chances with any clues he might have left at the Mark of the Question. He would have hidden the cloak long before then ... or at least have changed the impressive clasp!

Pryce noticed that the man waiting in line in front of him had turned in Covington's direction. Pryce suddenly realized that he must have been grunting, whispering aloud, and making faces as he considered his options. He opened his mouth to apologize, then shut it again. The man wasn't looking at him as if he were a gibbering idiot or even an annoyance. In fact, he wasn't actually looking into his eyes at all. He was looking at Pryce's chin, averting his gaze as if he were facing some sort of deity.

The man's mouth was moving as if he were trying to say something. His hands started fluttering like a bird with its wings clipped. Then the arms started making little sweeping motions in

front of him. "P-P-P-Please," he said to Pryce. "I beg your pardon, good sir?"

"No, no, I beg your pardon. Please ... I would take it as an honor if you would... take my place in line." "Really?"

"Please. You would honor me."

Pryce contemplated this odd but pleasant turn of events. He tried to come up with various reasons for it, but nothing believable was forthcoming. He couldn't very well turn down the kind offer... that would be unforgivably rude. There was nothing to do but accept the man's place in line and thank him properly later.

Covington stepped forward, drawing the interest of the next man in line. That man glanced back, started to turn forward again, then whipped his head back toward Pryce as if it had been yanked by a steel cable. He blinked up at Pryce, his mouth dropped open, and he backed up into the person in front of him. That individual whirled around and started to complain, but he saw that the man wasn't looking at him. He followed the first man's gaze to Pryce's visage.

"By—by all the magic in Talath!" the latter man breathed, then took the former man's arm and pulled them both out of Covington's way. "Please, sir... if you would..."

"I would be delighted," Pryce said with feeling. "Thank you very much." He took position in front of them, standing his tallest, then shook his head with a disbelieving smile. Everyone in Merrickarta had told him that the Lallorians were tighter than an Akhluarian sinkhole, but he was receiving nothing but the utmost courtesy. Well, he was taller than everyone else in line, and from what he could tell, younger as well. And if he were pressed, well, then, sure, better-looking, too.

Pryce cocked his head and smiled with pleasure. That's when the old woman in front of him noticed him. She looked all the way up his thin figure, then stopped at his face. Her head came

out from under her hood like a turtle peering out of its shell.

"It—it's you!"

Pryce looked at her kindly. What could he say, really? "None other," he replied pleasantly.

She rapidly gathered up her skirts and started to shuffle farther back into the line.

"Oh, no, no, no," Pryce said earnestly, trying to direct her back to her position in front of him.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes," the woman muttered, still trying to get around him. "I insist... you must..." She feinted to the right, and when Pryce moved in that direction, she slipped by and stood triumphantly beside the others behind him.

Pryce looked at the satisfied little band, who were looking back at him like proud parents, then shrugged and turned toward the gate. He stood there for a few moments with his fists on his hips, then politely tapped the shoulder of the next person in line.

"Hello," he said.

The person whose shoulder he had tapped only gaped, his jaw dropping, then rising again, like a fish out of water. Finally he stepped aside.

Pryce took an exaggerated step forward. He slowly leaned down, placing his head just over the shoulder of the next person in line. "Excuse me?" he said affably. The man grunted in reply. "How long have you been waiting?" Pryce asked, undeterred. The man grunted again. "Pardon me?" Pryce continued. "I didn't hear what you said. What was that again?"

"I said—" the man began angrily, but by then he had turned to look at the intrusive questioner. "I—I—I—I said, uh, I said I shouldn't be standing in the way of a man of your reputation! Sir, I beg you..."

"Your place in line?" Covington suggested, already moving forward. "You're too kind." It seemed that youth, vitality, and pleasant looks were at a premium at the Lallor Gate. Pryce rubbed his

hands together in anticipation. Cushy job for life indeed! If

the respect and kindnesses of these people were any evidence, he was going to like it here... a lot!

He wasn't even daunted by the grave gate guard who got closer and closer as each successive person saw Pryce, did a double take, and then offered him his or her place in line. The only thing that gave him pause was what looked like a difficult test that awaited him when he reached the one person between him and the big-eyed gate itself.

The first man in line—a skinny, nervous sort with an Adam's apple that skipped up and down like a bouncing ball—couldn't give up his place because he was already in the midst of the entry examination. It soon became abundantly clear that access to Lallor came only after a thorough explanation of who you were and a complete examination of what you could be.

An admissions clerk in a thick, elegant hooded vestment sat behind a floating slab of marble, upon which rested a pile of parchment. The man's face was living proof of the law of gravity. Everything was sinking on his wizened visage, from the bags under his watery blue eyes to the jowls that hung like a hairless beard on either side of a mouth that looked like an upside-down horseshoe.

Standing slightly behind this clearly disapproving character was a stone golem, a more classic example of which Pryce could hardly imagine. Nine and a half feet tall, at least two thousand pounds, and chiseled to look like a cross between a gigantic headstone and a huge tree trunk, it loomed menacingly between the clerk and the gate.

Its rock eyes were closed, its nose flat and wide, and its long lips gave an impression of being slightly irked. Its body had only the merest suggestion of legs, giving Pryce the distinct feeling that it could not be tipped or knocked over. The most impressive and noticeable aspect of the thing, however, was its hands. They were huge and flat, seemingly made to create thunder if the

creature ever applauded. Covington could imagine a Lallor

invader getting his head turned to flatbread by a single resounding clap. The monstrous golem had the effect it was no doubt created for: to discourage anyone except the most foolhardy or suicidal from making a run for the freedom and prosperity that Lallor promised.

Pryce's previous bravado disappeared like a popping soap bubble. He gritted his teeth in concern and drew in a long breath. Then he became aware of the admissions clerk's questions to the only person who remained between Pryce and the head of the line.

"Race?" The gatekeeper's voice was similar to his face: heavy, thick, and deep.

"Human," the small, bent, thin person in front of Pryce said quickly and quietly, manhandling his hat nervously.

The clerk suddenly went on quickly, as if the nervous man hadn't spoken. "A, dwarf; B, elf; C, gnome; D, half-elf; E, halfling; F, human; G, other."

"Uh, that would be F, sir. Yes, definitely F."

The clerk ignored the dithering. He seemed only to hear the letter "F" and duly marked it down with a quill pen. Then he continued the interrogation, his voice again somber and slow. "Class?"

The man waited for the clerk to continue, but when he didn't, the befuddled person felt compelled to say, "Some schooling, sir..."

"A, bard; B, priest; C, vagabond; D, warrior; E, wizard; F, other."

"Oh! Uh ... C, I suppose ... No, A! Yes, that's right, A" The clerk stopped dead, then looked up slowly, ominously. "Well, which is it? A or C?"

The skinny man's eyes flicked nervously to the expressionless, motionless golem. "I have traveled many miles, sir," he said with a wan smile. "I wish to be an entertainer for the good people within the city."

The clerk stared at him silently. Pryce found himself holding his breath, but suddenly the silence was broken as the clerk

sonorously said "C," marked it down, then continued quickly. "Are you, or have you ever known, a thief?"

The nervous man chirped, "No, sir!"

"Do you possess skills in pickpocketing, lock opening, trap removal, camouflage, wall climbing, shadow hiding, or silent movement?" Pryce inwardly winced at mention of the second item, plus the last three. He began to work his mouth nervously, stretching his lips across his teeth, in preparation for the coming interview. This was not going to be easy... not with that big eye above them, watching for any sign of discomfort, and the golem below, waiting to act as official bouncer.

"No, sir, I assure you," said the little man earnestly. "I only want to entertain, and I hope to find favor with the good people of Lallor."

"How long do you intend to audition?" the clerk intoned, looking up from his parchment.

At this question, the man started to relax. "I think I would need only a fortnight permit, sir. By then I'm sure I could show my worth."

"Fine," said the clerk brusquely, seemingly no longer concerned with the man. He was now paying attention only to his parchment, where he was rapidly writing something, the quill pen jiggling busily. But just as the little man finally felt comfortable enough to breathe a sigh of relief and release a broad smile, the clerk looked up again suddenly and said, 'Two men play five games of chance. Each man wins the same number of games, and there are no ties. How can this be?"

"Wha—what?" the surprised little man stammered.

'Two men. Five games. Each wins. No ties. How?"

"I... but... how does this

"Come, come, sir," the gatekeeper burbled reasonably.

"Surely you didn't think that desire was enough to secure entry to Lallor.

We are an exclusive community, sir. We must know that

those who seek to entertain—especially those who seek to entertain— have their wits about them. Now, come along, please hurry. How can two men play five games with no ties and both win?"

"I'm sorry." The little man was first confused, then desperate, then crestfallen. "I—I"

Pryce put a hand on his shoulder. "They weren't playing each other," he whispered.

"What?"

"The two men weren't playing each other," he repeated. "That's the only way they could both win an equal number of games."

Comprehension spread across the little man's face. The reaction of the clerk, however, was not so beneficent. He struggled to his feet, both fists shaking on the floating marble slab. "I beg your pardon, sir!" he said angrily. "How dare you?"

Pryce knew he had to think and talk even faster now. If that golem was psychically attuned to the clerk's emotions, his head was applesauce. There was only one thing to do: Distract attention from himself.

"I apologize, but it is imperative I speak to someone in authority. It is about my friend. Gamor Turkal____" To his amazement,

Pryce watched the clerk's wrathful expression melt, then, even more incredibly, rise like a basset hound being offered prime steak. The clerk then repeated his previous admonition, but the tone this time was one of apology.

"Sir... I beg your pardon!"

"Yes, yes," Pryce said humbly. "But my friend Gamor..." He started to point back down the road.

"Of course, sir!" the clerk interrupted, hurrying around the floating marble slab. "Gamor Turkal told us of your coming. We have been waiting for you!"

"You have?"

"Of course," the clerk said enthusiastically, raising an arm to

put over Pryce's shoulders, then thinking better of it. "We've been awaiting your arrival for some time."

Pryce blinked. His mind had been ready for a lot of things, but not this. "Really? Well, the storm slowed me down a bit, and then there were the dangers of the pass_____"

"Oh, we knew you would make quick work of them," the clerk said dismissively. "But come, come. You must be hungry and thirsty after your journey." Only then did the clerk feel secure enough to take Pryce by the shoulders and lead him toward the open gate.

"But—but," Pryce stammered, pointing back at the line of staring pilgrims, "shouldn't I take the test?"

"Oh, pshaw," the clerk said. "This test isn't for you! Only you would think of having the humility to stand in line and take the entrance exam. Your kindness and consideration have not been exaggerated!" He drew Pryce under the gate's eye, which followed his every move. Covington stared back at the thing, concerned that it might be looking down into his very soul.

"What a beautiful shade of blue," he said with a toothy but mirthless grin, watching it. "No, green. Now brown!"

The clerk actually chuckled, his many sagging facial parts jiggling like coin sacks. "The Eye of the Inquisitrix," he said cheerily. "No one enters, of course, without being recorded. Not even you!"

"Sound thinking," Pryce said, managing to wrest his own eyes away from the ominous cyclopic orb above him. "Very wise." Then he was inside the gate.

"Sir," the clerk said demurely, "I can't begin to tell you what an honor it is that I should be the one to welcome you to our humble city. And that I, Matthaunin Witterstaet, should be allowed to... well, sir, I don't want to embarrass you, but I shall be telling my nieces and nephews that these hands actually touched...!" The old fellow couldn't go on, which was just as well, because Pryce wasn't listening to him. Instead, he was marveling at the exclu-

sive "Jewel of Halruaa." Whatever might happen to him from that moment on, he would never forget his first look at Lallor.

Both the city and the wall had been built very cunningly and very well. The wall encircled three quarters of the municipality and nestled on the highest elevation of the city. Beyond the wall, the city sloped lazily down to the shoreline of Lallor Bay. As Pryce had discovered earlier, only the very tops of the city's highest castles could be seen from outside the wall. The slope also kept everyone who waited in line to take the entrance examination from seeing too much of the glory that was Lallor.

One glance told Covington that only Halruaa's best and brightest would dare live amidst such splendor. He resisted the temptation to rub his eyes and tried to act as if he weren't overwhelmed. The buildings were of various widths and sizes, but they all seemed to grow out from the lush green vegetation that surrounded them, interspersed with refreshing splashes of riotous color from rare pollandry plants.

Some buildings were classic mansions of tan and dark brown plaster, while others were extensive cottages of precious stone. All were veritable palaces of the most amazing design and construction. Others appeared like huge bulbs of both organic material and opaque glass. The bulbs were not only of many dusky colors but also of many shapes, some more pointed and some more round, but all large enough to comfortably house extended families.

Pryce's head craned forward to look closer at the landscape. He thought he could see movement within these amazing walls, but it might have been a reflection from the clouds and the sparkling bay. Shaking his head in wonder, he looked over his shoulder to see the more familiar castles that befit the great wizards of any Halruan city. These low, wide constructions almost formed an inner wall of their own, which stretched from one end of the city wall to the other.

"I hope our unassuming little community doesn't disappoint a

man of your travels and experiences," the admission clerk intoned modestly.

Pryce turned on him with smiling insight. "Laying it on a bit thick, don't you think... what did you say your name was again, my good man?"

The admission clerk's jowls shook as he moved his head back in surprise, then widened as his smile of appreciation grew. "Matthaunin Witterstaet, at your service! And, if I may say so, sir, you are as perceptive as everyone has alleged."

"Everyone?" But before Pryce could pursue the point further, an impressive woman marched purposefully up to stand before them. Her sudden appearance made Pryce aware that the splendid architecture had distracted him from the well-mannered, well-dressed people who went about their everyday business on the wide, well-maintained streets.

The woman stood about five feet, three inches tall—the top of her sandy-colored hair came to his sternum—and she must have weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. When Pryce finished examining the small feet wedged into skin-tight boots, bandy but well-shaped legs in dark hide pants, small but powerful torso within the U-necked, blood-red tunic with the white-and-gold-dotted black epaulets, he concentrated on the face above the deep-purple cowled cape that swept off her shoulders and brushed the cobblestoned road at her feet.

Big, dark blue eyes, a snout of a nose, high, prominent cheekbones, and thin, thin, thin lips. Make that lip, singular, he thought. The top one was merely a straight gash a few centimeters above her sharp chin. Not to the least of Covington's surprise, her sandy hair was pulled back in a tight, short pigtail.

"A hale and hearty morning to you, Greeter," she said to the clerk in a not entirely pleasant reedy voice.

"And a hale and hearty morning to you, Inquisitrix," he

replied. He moved both arms toward Pryce, as if presenting him as a long-sought prize. "And this is—"

"You don't have to tell me who this is!" she interrupted, smiling up at Pryce. He noticed that her incisors were a bit sharper than normal. "One look told me. I would not, could not, make a mistake about him!" She shot out a hand. "Berridge Lymwich, Mystran Inquisitrix of the first rank, at your service, sir. It's a pleasure to finally meet you after all I've heard."

He took her hand. It was cold and hard, her grip like a vise. Pryce winced and quickly pulled his hand free. "If your pleasure is as great as your strength," he said, "then you must be delirious with joy."

Lymwich's chin went down, her mouth opened, and she blinked. Then she brayed a loud laugh. The clerk leaned toward her, a twinkle in his eye. "Is he not everything we've heard?"

She looked Pryce up and down appraisingly. "And more!" She put one foot behind the other and half-bowed, half-curtisied. 'Truly, sir, a pleasure to meet you."

'Thank you," Pryce replied, fluttering his own hand to make sure all the bones and knuckles were still in place. Then he shook a finger at her. "You Lallorians keep surprising me with your friendliness. I was told that I would be lucky to receive much more than an occasional glance, certainly nothing as familiar as a handshake."

Lymwich allowed another laugh to escape with a bray, marveling at his amiable forthrightness. "Now, who told you that?" she asked with a certain familiarity. "Has Geerling been telling you tales?"

Pryce's eyebrows raised. Geerling? Geerling who? Or what? But before he could inquire, the clerk leaned forward. "More likely Gamor Turkal," he said with a smile that crinkled the flesh around his beady eyes and a nod that shook his several chins.

'Turkal," Lymwich sniffed with a certain distaste. "Hmph." His

former partner's name certainly had changed the mood, but Pryce wasn't surprised. Gamor often had that effect on people. He could kill a conversation at five yards. "But enough small talk,

Greeter," the inquisitrix said briskly. "I believe you have more interlopers to test... ?"

"But, Mistress Lymwich," Matthaunin protested, "it isn't every day that—"

"Enough, Greeter," the inquisitrix said curtly, making it plain that his personal time with Pryce was at an end. "Our illustrious visitor is here now, after much anticipation. We of the Mystran In-quisitorium can take it from here. There is no need to delay him, or yourself, any longer."

The gatekeeper was visibly disappointed. "Yes, Inquisitrix. I understand." Dejectedly he turned to go.

"How far can a canine run into a forest?" Pryce asked him in lieu of a good-bye.

"Wha-what?" Matthaunin stuttered, then brightened. "Oh... oh, I see. A riddle! A dog... the woods? Let's see... Oh, dear, I should know this___Curses! All right, how far?"

"Halfway," Pryce informed him with a grin.

"Half... ? Oh, of course! For the other half, it's running out of the forest! Yes, yes, that's good. I'll use that___" And then, shaking his head and smiling, Matthaunin Witterstaet disappeared back out the gate to his parchment, golem, and refugees.

Pryce turned back to the inquisitrix, who was watching him with a strange expression on her face. "What is it?" he asked her directly.

"You didn't have to..." she began, then tried again. "Why did you... ?" And when that didn't work either, she settled on a new observation. "You're nothing like I expected, but somehow everything I expected."

Pryce thought about chastising her for holding any preconceptions at all, but then he let the saner half of his head prevail. "What exactly did you expect?" he asked with

a bemused smile.

His informality had the opposite effect of what he had intended. The inquisitrix cleared her throat and stood straight, her shoulders back. "Why, you, naturally, sir. I hope you will forgive

me. I'm forgetting my responsibility. Of course we saw you through the Eye of the Inquisitor, and I was sent to make sure you are settled in comfortably. Will you follow me, sir?"

She led him down the road into Lallor proper, and soon Pryce was torn between trying to figure out ways to elicit information from Lymwich about her relationship to Gamor and what, exactly, the late rascal had told everyone about him, and trying not to be overwhelmed by the seemingly endless delights of this small, luxurious city by the sea.

Things were not simply built here, but tastefully designed, from street curbs to seemingly insignificant window displays. Incredibly most of the items offered for sale were hardly ostentatious. Rather, they were artful, even elegant, in their simplicity. Everything was clean, but hardly sterile. Individual character shone from each dwelling or shop they passed. Colorful decorations caught his eye everywhere he looked.

The people they passed were far from effusive, but certainly not unfriendly. In their soft, tastefully flamboyant clothes and cloaks that swept the street, they looked discerningly from him to the inquisitrix, then nodded with something approaching approval. For all the tales he had heard of Lallorian paranoia about strangers, the only evidence he had seen so far was the stringent entrance exam. Perhaps that was all the wealthy, civilized residents needed to maintain control... that and the all-seeing eye at the main gate.

An all-seeing eye that must have seen Gamor Turkal leave the city... and should know that he didn't come back!

The rest of their walk was mostly a blur to Covington. As much as he wanted to enjoy the glorious architecture and landscaping, it was becoming increasingly important for him

to find out what everyone else seemed to know about him. So intent was he on figuring out some way to get this information from the tiny, tightly wound inquisitrix that he didn't notice how full the vegetation had become around them and how dense the tall, thick-barked trees were in this part of the city. "Here you are, sir."

Covington looked up. "Excuse me?" They stood in a dark, cool cul-de-sac between the rest of Lallor and the inner wall of castles. They stood on rectangular stones of dark red. The dead-end road was shaped vaguely like a bulb, the walls of which circled Pryce on three sides and were totally covered by clinging, flowering vines. As he inspected the vines, he noticed that they grew wilder the higher they went, creating a partial ceiling of foliage above him.

Lymwich motioned to his left. "Here." Pryce turned to stare at the huge trunk of an impressive stevlyman tree. The botanical wizard Usherwood Stevlyman had developed this particular species of tree many years ago, along with the much-beloved, multicolored flowering pollandry plant. The tree was cherished for its rich brown color and its elegant shape.

The inquisitrix again motioned Pryce toward the wide trunk of the stevlyman tree. On closer inspection, it appeared to have a gaping man-sized hole in it.

"Yes?" Pryce said slowly.

Berridge released another laugh. "You don't understand. This is yours, sir. Your dwelling." "My dwelling? A tree?"

She nodded and Pryce finally looked up. He noticed exquisite little round windows divided into even smaller square window panels, peeking out from the interwoven vines that covered everything. He then took a closer look at the tree trunk. The opening was cunningly concealed among the bumps and bends of the tree trunk itself, and it was so dark inside the opening that its very existence was difficult to detect from even a few feet away.

Pryce poked his head into the opening. Inside a small recessed area was a door, also designed to blend into the tree. Once again Pryce was reminded that everything about this city seemed to be designed like a living work of art.

Covington suddenly remembered his guide waiting outside. "Ha!" he said from inside the tree. "I am fully prepared to find suitable lodgings on my own. There's no need to put anyone else out"

"Oh, no," said Lymwich. "We wouldn't hear of it. Gamor made Geerling's wishes perfectly clear. You are to stay here." Pryce looked back over his shoulder from the entryway.

"Well," he said with a shrug, "if I must, I must____" He backed out of the entryway and motioned for the inquisitrix to precede him. "After you."

Lymwich shook her head. "Oh, no," she said. "You're not tricking me so easily. I'd be mad to risk the protective magic of Geerling Ambersong!"

Aha, Pryce thought. One small step forward for Pryce Covington. Now, at least, he had a surname to go with the mysterious Geerling. He also had some sort of protective magic he had to figure out some way to get by. Instinctively he did what he had done before when he faced a thorny problem. "Inquisitrix Lymwich," he said somberly, "do you know Gamor Turkal?"

"Humph," she said, "that rake? Please, no more mention of him, if you don't mind. It was disgusting the way he crowed about you, his friendship with you, and how important your arrival was to Grand Mage Ambersong."

Pryce was distracted by a pleasant sensation of flattery. "Really? He talked about me?"

"Incessantly. He and you this, you and the Grand Mage that, he and Geerling Ambersong..."

Covington hoped she didn't see him twitch. Geerling Ambersong—could he have been the other dead man at the tree? Pryce quickly turned around and faced the door again. Given the worsening odds, it was better to get this over with

sooner rather than later. At least if Ambersong's magic scrambled his body, his brains, or both, the suspense would be over, and he would be put out of his growing misery. He closed his eyes and took a final step toward the door.

He perceived a dim light from the other side of his eyelids and heard a click. Somehow the noise was welcoming rather than frightening. He opened his eyes just in time to catch the tail end of a glow coming from someplace below his chin, but before he could react to this turn of events, the door swung slowly inward.

The cloak clasp, Pryce thought. It must be a magic key.... Suddenly his eyes were filled with a vision of homecoming the likes of which he had never experienced. The inside of the tree stretched back and up farther than the outside gave any hint of. It tapered to a vaguely pyramidal shape, complete with branches hollowed out from the inside to be used as storage space.

The interior had been decorated with comfortable-looking wooden furniture, thick rugs, tasteful lamps, and the biggest stone fireplace Covington had ever seen. Accessories and household items were stored in the lowest branch holes.

Much to Pryce's surprise, there wasn't a single magical item he could recognize in the comfortable home. There was, however, stacked on natural shelves running from branch to branch along the inner tree wall, a large collection of the one thing Pryce Covington truly held dear.

"Books," he breathed. "So many books." He looked back at Lymwich, who remained purposefully, and stiffly, outside the door. "This is mine?"

"The Grand Mage made his wishes clear," she replied, a trifle enviously. "It's yours."

He looked at the dwelling again, noticing large recessed areas that held the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen. Silently he took back every bad thing he had ever said or thought about Gamor Turkal. This place had been created with Pryce Covington in mind.

It was all too much. Covington felt giddy, almost faint. He realized that the ever-changing series of events was finally getting the better of him. But he didn't feel like resting. Sleep was the last thing he wanted.

"Very nice," he finally understated. "This will do just fine. Tell me, my good inquisitrix, is there a local Gulp and Gasp about? Can I secure you a brew at the nearest Chew and Spew in the area?"

"You think I didn't notice?" Berridge Lymwich asked him, illustrating her point in the air with a tankard of ale. "I'm a first-ranked, top-class Instran Myquisitrix! I mean—well, you know what I mean. I notice everything!"

They were on their third tankard of mead. She had led him outside his new home, then turned to the left where the wall of the cul-de-sac nestled against the stevlyman tree trunk. There, behind some flowering vines, was an almost hidden circular stairway made of iron.

Pryce marveled at how the stairway was entirely concealed by the vines, so no one could see in and they couldn't see out. He could hear the water of Lallor Bay lapping in the distance, however, and could see the light which bathed this stairway interior in a yellow-green glow. As they descended, Covington counted the steps. At the twenty-fifth step, they emerged from the vines onto a level between the inner wall of wizards' castles and the bay. There Pryce looked out onto the most rustic area of the waterfront.

"It's the oldest section of the city," Lymwich told him curtly. "Made by our first residents as an unprepossessing retreat." She sniffed at its ancient stone and wood dwellings. "The whole thing should be torn down, I say."

Pryce disagreed. He admired the cunning way the original Lallor vacationers had made the dwellings seem simple, while still imbuing great character and charm to the houses. It reminded him of quaint rural villages back home, which practically exuded the sight, smell, and sound of family

togetherness. Even

now he thought he could hear the welcome sound of families singing and laughing with one another.

"Come on," Berridge grunted. "I didn't bring you here for a picnic." She motioned behind her with her thumb. Pryce looked where she was pointing and saw an establishment built directly into the rock wall. The window frames were wooden beams, the glass panes clear and thick. The big gray steel-enforced door bore a simple sign: Schreders. At Your Service.

Inside, it seemed to be a comfortable combination of the most luxurious sea captain's quarters and an imperial wizard's cave. The walls and ceiling were not a consistent width or height throughout. Instead, upright wooden beams and crossbeams vied willy-nilly with stone and rocks to create many heights and widths. Between them were some of the finest wood chairs and sculpted stone tables Pryce had ever laid eyes on.

Pryce was studying some lamps made to look like bottles, tankards, and casks of liquor when he was distracted by a booming voice. "You don't have to tell me who this is!" Azzoparde Schreders, the proprietor of the establishment, had made himself known.

Who else could he be? Pryce wondered with amusement as a full-bearded, ruddy-faced man in a white shirt, black pants, and brown apron stood before him, arms spread wide. His head was as round as the moon, and his thick black hair came down from an equally round bald spot. His arms, torso, and legs were round, thick, and sturdy, and his expression, like his restaurant and bar, was open and inviting.

"It took you long enough to get here, eh? Eh?" he jibed in a voice that sounded like a sack of gravel dragged behind a cart. "You expected us to wait for you forever? Fall Festival time is almost upon us!"

Pryce smiled pleasantly. "I had far to come."

"I'll say," his host said conspiratorially, moving his elbow like

a bird's flapping wing. "I should say you did! Eh? Eh?"

Rather than deal with this increasingly confusing conversation, Pryce continued to admire the rough-hewn beauty of the extensive place. An inviting series of alcoves featured both transparent and darkly colored window panes. To his added pleasure, magical illumination made everything clearly visible to the eye without unnecessary brightness.

"Welcome to the most exclusive epicurean drinkery in an already very exclusive city," Schreders boasted. "Just smooth enough for the gastronome—" he elbowed Lymwich and gave a knowing wink—"and just rough enough for the earth-salters!"

"Nice place you have here," Pryce told him, then leaned toward the inquisitrix. "Cliches for every occasion." Lymwich barked out a polite bray.

"Perhaps you are as great as they say!" Schreders marveled. "Getting the great inquisi-witch to laugh is no mean feat! Eh? Eh?" Berridge hit Azzo on the arm as he rocked back and forth, clutching his solid belly.

Lymwich could only sigh with resignation. "Anyone who's anyone will eventually show up here," she reluctantly admitted. "The comfort and privacy are topnotch."

"So's the security." Azzo winked at the inquisitrix again before rising to his full height to study Covington's face. "What'll you imbibe, my good sir? If we don't have it, you can't drink it."

"Truer words have I rarely heard," Pryce said appreciatively, rising to the challenge. "I know a town by its brew. It rarely fails. As goes the local liquid, so goes the locality. Rough, coarse ale? A fight is no doubt brewing. Smooth, full-bodied grog? There's love in the air."

Schreders started to slap Pryce on the back, then thought better of it. Instead, he stepped back and pounded the bar. That sound, like almost all his other noises of bravado, was quickly swallowed up by the various nooks and crannies in the large, sprawling room. "And truer words have / rarely

heard, sir," Azzo replied. The bar was in the very back of the establishment. It was constructed in a horseshoe shape, so those seated there could either maintain their privacy by keeping their backs to the windows and the restaurant, or face toward the front door.

Azzo slipped between the back wall at the left end of the bar and took his position behind a row of taps. "I like you, sir," he told Pryce. "I truly do. The first round, at the very least, is on me!"

Pryce Covington had seldom heard words any sweeter. And if the first brew he soon quaffed was any indication, Lallor was full of promise. It remained so for the second round, personally served by Azzo at a recessed table, where Pryce parried Berridge Lymwich's questions with the always reliable "Please-let's-not-talk-about-me-I'd-rather-hear-more-about-you" gambit.

He learned that the inquisitrix was pretty much what she appeared to be: fiercely loyal, dedicated, and ambitious, but with a streak of insecurity. Her slight inferiority complex manifested itself in expressions of sullen disapproval whenever Azzo's beautiful blonde serving wench got too close. But then Lymwich suddenly changed the subject to inquiries about the books in his new dwelling.

"I told you," she admonished with the careful enunciation of the slightly inebriated. "I notice everything. What is it with Geerling and you and all those books?"

Covington grew still. It was getting late, and apparently she couldn't handle her drinks. One more, he was convinced, and her minking and words would become too mushy to be useful. If he was going to learn anything, it was time to draw her out. "I can't speak for Geerling, but I'm fond of books because they don't change."

"What does that mean, Blade?"

Covington leaned back. What had she called him? He shook his head. He decided that it must have been the drink

slurring her words. He shrugged casually and leaned forward again. "You know. People change, places change, but books don't."

"What are you talking about? Books get older... the pages yellow..."

"I'm not talking about age," he said, surprised at how the words flowed from him. Maybe the deceptively powerful mead had gotten to him as well. "I'm talking about where it counts—for books and people. Inside. People who once told the truth can start to lie. Books don't. If they start with the truth, they will always tell you the truth."

Suddenly Berridge Lymwich leaned over the table, placing her face not more than two inches from his. To Pryce's amazement, he could tell that she wasn't intoxicated in the slightest. It was she who had been testing him. "Oh, you and your flowery words," she said evenly, her face a knowing mask. "Gamor Turkal and Geerling Ambersong may have impressed everyone else with the tales of your spectacular adventures, but I want you to know one thing. You're going to have to prove yourself to me, Darlington Blade!"

CHAPTER THREE

Switch Blade

Pryce Covington was afraid he might be sick, and it wasn't the drink that made him feel that way. Mystran Inquisitrix Berridge Lymwich might as well have hit him in the solar plexus with a bar stool. Calling him by that name had the same effect.

Darlington Blade. Of course! Covington remembered the strange way the cloak clasp had directed his finger. Down, then around and up. D. Then down twice to the right. B. The initials of Darlington Blade. Or maybe Dumb Bunny. Or Dead Beat. With a sudden realization as clear and powerful as a glass house falling on him, he knew that no one in Lallor thought of him as Pryce Covington. They all thought he was the great Darlington Blade!

Darlington Blade. Even lowly messengers in far-off

Merrickarta had heard of Blade. The legendary adventurer-wizard who studied with an exalted but eccentric mage, who was the primary mage in the realm's most exclusive community, which was the vacation spot for many of the nation's most prominent wizards and other important citizens.

So that was who Geerling Ambersong was! Darlington Blade's master! Was he the other dead body? Not bloody likely. Geerling Ambersong was supposed to be well over seventy. Then again, Blade's teacher was thought to have been over seventy for more than a decade. No, Covington had taken this unique cloak—the cloak that everyone in Lallor recognized as that of Darlington Blade!—from a younger-looking corpse.

Pryce Covington drank the rest of his third tankard in one impressive pull. The brew seemed to seep through his body, calling out in a distant bittersweet song. Darlington Blade, dead in a tree's shade... and Pryce wore his cloak. The possibilities were prodigious... and frightening.

"I hardly thought the great Darlington Blade would be so affected by a challenge from the likes of me," Lymwich interrupted his thoughts. Covington kept thinking about his predicament while he put his wit to work on the inquisitrix.

"Not, really," Pryce said distractedly. "Proving myself to you is of no concern to me. It is for you to decide whether I've proven myself or not. In the meantime, I will simply proceed about my business ... hopefully with style." He glanced down into the empty tankard. "Azzo, my good man! Another mead, if you don't mind!"

Lymwich seemed satisfied with this retort. But she wasn't about to join in the rest of the city's hero worship. "Come now," she said reasonably, still leaning forward. "Geerling Ambersong disappears, then you show up. What's an inquisitrix to think?"

"Whatever she wants to, obviously," Pryce said dryly as the comely blonde serving wench in the low-cut, lace-up dress

put another foaming brew before him. He winked and she smiled back at him, then Lymwich's scowl chased her away.

"Come, come, Blade," she pressed. "You must know where Geerling Ambersong is... or what happened to him."

"Of what possible concern is that to you?" Pryce wondered, looking to the mead for some way out of this particular series of queries.

"Don't patronize me," the inquisitrix retorted. "The Fall Festival is coming up, and Gamor brags about how hard Ambersong is training you. Then, after years of secrecy, you finally show up in the flesh just as the old man vanishes. You must acknowledge that the Mystran Inquisitorium should not turn a blind eye to these events." Suddenly Lymwich seemed to change from a dedicated investigator to a crafty confederate. She leaned close and whispered, "So, come, you can tell me... what does the cunning old buzzard have planned?"

There was nothing Covington would like more than to tell her exactly what Geerling Ambersong had planned, but in order to do so, he'd first have to know it himself. But at least this latest twist in the conversation seemed to be leading out of Accusation Alley and up the more benign Curiosity Circle. Any road that didn't stop in a dead end was all right with Pryce.

The answer came to him with the relief of a field mouse seeing an owl's back. "I honestly can't say," he told Lymwich with complete sincerity, "but I assure you that when I find out, you'll be one of the first to know."

The inquisitrix leaned back, trying to hide her disappointment. News of Ambersong's plans would have put her in good with her superiors, no doubt. "Your reputation aside, Darlington Blade," she said gravely, "you are still a veritable stranger here in Lallor. And it is not wise for a stranger to forge a nonforthcoming relationship with the Mystran Inquisitorium."

Covington would normally had left well enough alone, but

there was something about Lymwich, something about this city, something about the mead, and something about the knowledge that, at least for now, he was Darlington Blade that gave him uncusomary courage. "Nor, I imagine," he replied quietly, "is it wise for an ambitious inquisitrix to forge an untrusting relationship with a truthful disciple of Geerling Ambersong."

Lymwich made a dismissive noise, pushed back from the table, and planted her feet on the floor. "If s time to report back to

the MIC," she said, buttoning her floor-length cape. She nodded curtly at Covington. "The Mystran Inquisitrix Castle, that is," she translated. "We'll... I'll be watching."

"I'll be performing," he promised, then turned away and took another drink from his tankard. When he looked back, Berridge Lymwich was gone. Well, he thought, taking another drink and ignoring the beads of sweat that appeared on his brow, that went well. He turned to see if Azzo Schreders was available for some subtle probing but saw only the comely form of the serving wench.

As soon as the inquisitrix left, the serving wench had reappeared, apparently awaiting this very chance. Like her employer, who was the very model of a tavernkeeper, she was the very image of a tavern-goer's dream. Tall, with a thick mane of yellow hair. Shapely, with a wonderfully curved body contained in a flowing off-white dress, held amazingly close to her by a laced-up bodice of brown leather.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said with demure purpose, her voice carefully modulated in a husky, feminine tone. "Sheyrhen Karkober, at your service. Are you hungry?"

Pryce's eyebrows raised. He tried to keep his dark eyes centered on her blue ones... and away from the riches thrust at him by her revealing bodice.

"Is there anything I can get you?" she continued willingly. "Anything at all?"

She had already gotten him something, of course: the knowledge that being Darlington Blade was far more attractive than being Pryce Covington. For a second, he thought of answering her truthfully, but he quickly realized the futility of trying to maintain this impersonation for more than a few minutes. Her type hadn't given him a second look in Merrickarta, and without the name now pressed upon him, wouldn't have given him a first look here.

Pryce fought the urge to leave the tavern as fast as he could, realizing he had better get something in his stomach before trying to figure his way out of this predicament. He made a quick mental calculation of the money he had in his jacket's hidden pockets, then decided to splurge on the titanium plate special— an ample, savory assortment of bite-sized meat, cheese, bread, vegetable, and fruit delights. Who knew when he might eat again? Escaping into the mountains was hard and dangerous work.

As Sheyrhen briskly went off to get his order, Pryce busied himself with weighing the pros and cons of his new understanding of his situation. Obviously no one knew what Darlington Blade looked like. That was good. Blade was famous for his wizardry. That was bad. Geerling Ambersong was missing. That was good and bad. He might come back at any second. That was all bad. He might have killed Gamor and the real Darlington Blade by the tree. That was very, very bad.

The odds were not particularly good in the long run, but for the moment, all was splendid. He had a beautiful place to live and commanded exceptional respect. After all the years Pryce had spent keeping his humor and ego buoyed in the face of blatant and constant disdain, it was an all-encompassing pleasure to be treated in the manner to which he always thought he should have been accustomed. He decided that if everyone thought he was Darlington Blade, then that's who he would be ... until he slipped away in the night, never to be seen in Lallor again.

The drink had definitely gotten to him. He tried to spot Karkober returning with his food, but all he saw was that the crowd had gotten bigger. People were obviously leaving work and gathering for some early evening drink and company. Covington surveyed them analytically and appreciated what he saw.

There were handsome men in richly ornamented costumes, but their faces did not betray the ignorant arrogance of fops. These were serious people who honestly believed that the in-depth study of magic could overcome any obstacle and solve any

problem. Covington suddenly felt a pang moving from his empty stomach to his heavy heart. How could he even have toyed with the idea of trying to maintain an impersonation of Darlington Blade, of all people?

He looked down at his simple clothing. A cloak does not a hero make, he realized. What was he, really? A glorified messenger from the armpit of the Nath, that's all. At least his mouth was securely fastened to his brain, and he felt certain he could outtalk anyone in this room, but Mystra help him if it went any further than that

Besides, if they had any sense, they could easily do what he had done with Lymwich—simply refuse to play along. They wouldn't even bother rising to his challenge. They would refuse to get defensive, and he would be dismissed and forgotten before he could even utter his first "Oh, yeah?"

This was not Merrickarta. This was Lallor, where only the finest and most favored resided. No place for the likes of Pryce Covington... only the great Darlington Blade.

Covington struck the table with his fist. "By thunder!" he said, then looked around quickly. No one had paid the least heed. Well, if he wasn't going to be able to be Darlington Blade for long, then he at least was going to take advantage of it in the short term. He tore his eyes away from the gentlemen in favor of the opposite sex.

He smiled wistfully, expertly guessing at the professions of

the ladies he saw by the way they dressed and carried themselves. There were grooms, dressed in form-fitting riding costumes. There were jewelers, with tasteful but extensive displays of their wares on earlobes, arms, fingers, necks, waists, ankles, and even noses. There were weavers, wearing the finest gowns they could design. And there were many more, but there was only one person Covington couldn't assign a vocation to.

Not only was she the most impressive woman in the place, but there was a strength about her that the others couldn't match.

Her neck was long and fine. Her hair was even longer and shone from across the tavern like the dark red and black embers of a deep fire. Her hair was bound by brown leather laces, as was her light brown bodice.

Much to his pleasure, although he could not say why, her shirt was the same color as his, although hers was open at the neck in a deep, narrow V. Her full, loosely gathered skirt was a deep maroon and appeared neither summer-light nor winter-heavy. Her boots were also brown, with a copper and silver flash at the heel and toes.

For reasons Covington couldn't begin to fathom, she sat alone, even though her face had the classic beauty of a master artist's painting: Large eyes of an unknowable depth and color; straight, long nose; and full lips, the lower being the most full and lush Covington could remember having seen. It made her look as if she were always ready to burst into song... or be kissed.

Now, this is a woman worthy of Darlington Blade! he thought. And far be it for the lowly Pryce Covington to keep Blade from her. With his meal still nowhere in sight, he rose as steadily as possible, then began the long walk across the restaurant. His passing created a wave effect, as other diners noticed his cloak and became aware that the famous, though never seen, Darlington Blade was among them.

Soon he stood before her table, drinking in her exceptional

profile, as she elegantly sipped rich wine from an impressive goblet. Neither seemed aware that every other eye in the place was on them.

Pryce reached up for a hat he finally remembered he wasn't wearing. In midmotion, he tried to change the action into a sort of sophisticated, ornate salute and continued on into an elegant bow. But instead of any of the usual opening lines a person of her class and quality no doubt was accustomed to, he said, "We cannot see our own faces."

It took her completely by surprise, but she said nothing, just turned the light of her exquisite eyes on him. He continued, only slightly daunted.

"It explains why we exist," he boldly said to those eyes, more beautiful than any eyes he had thus far seen in Lallor. "We exist for each other—to see each other's faces. Therefore no person should remain alone when another can see his face."

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. For a moment, he was afraid he would have to explain the concept further, but he knew it would lead to desperate embarrassment.

"Please," he said, stepping closer. "Forgive my impertinence. I have just arrived in your—" he thought back to how the greeter at the gate had put it—"your humble community. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Blade... Darlington Blade." He finished the statement with a baroque bow, half-expecting the people in the restaurant to break out in applause.

He looked up just in time to catch the full contents of her wine goblet directly in his face.

Pryce Covington was blinking when he heard the loud clink of the goblet on the table, and he opened his eyes to see the angry young woman looking hurriedly around the table, as if she were looking for something to hit him with. When she didn't spot anything suitable, she jumped to her feet, nearly knocking over her chair. Then she stared at him, furious, with both fists clenched. Finally she spoke.

"You're Darlington Blade?" she seethed. "You're Darlington

Blade?" Then she turned and stormed out of the tavern.

Pryce didn't move until he saw some activity out the corner of his eye. A number of diners had risen from their tables, with expressions ranging from shocked to affronted, even vengeful. How dare she hurl chablis in the face of the great Darlington Blade! Several of them started for the door.

His face still dripping wine, Pryce quickly slipped in front of the angry diners and held out both arms to keep them from going after the woman and forcing her to apologize. When they had redirected their attention from the door to him, he licked his lips and chin.

"Amusing little vintage," he commented. "Azzo! Is it Halagard Prime?"

"Halarahh Golden," the proprietor immediately corrected him, realizing that Blade was trying to defuse the situation.

"Good guess, though."

"Ah," said Pryce, licking the remaining wine from his lips.

"Free, nonetheless." He and Schreders laughed, and, Zalathorm bless them, most of the rest of the diners joined in.

The laughter subsided as Pryce spotted Karkober and approached the bar, motioning for the waitress to put his dinner on the bar near the proprietor. He leaned over the plate, his arms folded on the bar edge, to look into the knowing face of Azzo Schreders. "Dearlyn Ambersong," was all the barman said.

"Ah," Pryce said, using Azzo's proffered damp cloth to clean the rest of his face. "Geerling's... ?"

"Daughter."

"Ah." Covington said again, sitting down.

"Her mother's name was Lynn," Azzo explained solemnly.

"Died in childbirth, sad to say. Father named her." Azzo looked distantly off toward the door. "Spitting image of her mother," he mused. "Her mother's temper, too." He took the crockery and cutlery the waitress had retrieved from Dearlyn's table and arranged it in front of Pryce.

"You all right, Darling?" Karkober inquired of Pryce solicitously. She leaned over provocatively before Azzo motioned her away with his head. She looked at him with resentment, but she went anyway.

Pryce ruminated at the bartender. "Doesn't like me, apparently ... Dearlyn, I mean."

Schreders pursed his lips, looking down at the wine goblet to make sure all the liquid had been emptied before he began cleaning it. "No," he intoned deeply. "I should say not."

Pryce started to eat. "Doesn't appreciate my approach?" he ventured.

"Doesn't appreciate your existence" Azzo corrected him.

Pryce took another bite of his food, choosing his next words carefully. "Can't blame her, I suppose_____"

"Oh, don't take it personally," Schreders said absently, busying himself with some goblets and tankards. "It's the talk of the town. Full of resentment, that one. She's told anyone who'd listen that her father should have been teaching her instead of you." He looked deeply into a goblet, seemingly to spot any stains he may have missed with his washcloth. "No one wants to listen to her anymore."

Pryce ate his food without comment, but inwardly he felt relief. Another disaster narrowly avoided. That's what he got for trying to exploit his mistaken identity. His best course of action was to finish his meal, leave the city quickly to "take care of some business that just came up," and then let the legend of Darlington Blade grow or wither of its own accord.

By the time Covington had finished his meal, he was more convinced than ever that this was the only possible scenario. Now all he had to do was leave the tavern without speaking to another soul. That way, no one else could possibly discover that he wasn't Darlington Blade—that he was, in fact, actually nothing more than the lowly, insignificant, inconsequential—

"Pryce Covington!" he heard from behind him.

Pryce sat bolt upright on the barstool and spun around.

Behind Pryce stood Azzo Schreders. Off to one side was Sheyrhen Karkober. And coming directly toward him, his arms spread wide, was tiny, portly, extravagantly dressed Teddington Fullmer.

Teddington Fullmer ... Pryce didn't have to wonder what he was doing in Lallor, nor in Schreders's bar. Fullmer was a successful trader of Luiren stout and Ulgarthian coffee, for whom Covington had worked when the businessman was investigating the exportation of Nathian ore deposits. He had ultimately decided to stay with liquid assets, but he was about to trade in cooked goose if Pryce didn't shift his mind into top gear. "Pryce! Pryce!" Fullmer boomed.

"Please, sir," Azzo interrupted from behind the bar. "I'll have your check for you immediately. No need to shout."

Covington launched himself from his seat and caught both Fullmer's arms in a death grip. "Teddington Fullmer," he said directly into his face. "Call me Darling."

"What?"

"Darling. Isn't that what you used to call me? Your Darling boy at any Pryce?" He laughed, a trifle hysterically. He knew even Fullmer might balk if he thought Covington was trying to impersonate a man as great as Darlington Blade. "Please, Teddington, for old time's sake—for me—call me Darling. Would you do me that favor, dear?"

"Darling? You want me to call you darling?"

"Would you? That would be wonderful." Pryce quickly leaned over and hissed into Fullmer's ear. "It's a bar bet. Go along with it. I'll cut you in." He leaned back and looked hopefully into the trader's face.

"What? Oho! Oh, ho, ho, ho!" Teddington said knowingly, then nodded.

Pryce nodded back, then led the man to the bar. "Azzo Schreders," he said, "I'd like you to meet Teddington Fullmer, the finest trader of refreshing beverages this side of the Shaar."

What the barkeep saw was a short, round man—stout,

befitting his product—with a magnificent mustache and goatee and a prominent widow's peak. He wore a dark-colored coat over an ornate vest, a ruffled shirt, and copper breeches under shin-high boots of expensive leather.

"Pleased to meet you, Schreders," the trader said expansively. "Any friend of... Darling's is a friend of mine."

Covington considered fainting in relief but decided against it

"Well," said Schreders with a raised eyebrow. "Good to meet you, too, Teddi. I imagine you'll be wanting to meet our wine-master, Gheevy Wotfirr. I'll call him up here, eh?"

The bartender left to fetch the wine manager while Fullmer turned to Pryce. "So what do I get, Pryce?" the trader asked insistently. "What's this all about?"

"No, no!" Pryce wailed softly. "Darling. Call me Darling. You get nothing—I get nothing—unless you call me Darling. Do you understand? From here on, I'm not... that other name. To you, I'm Darling!"

"Yes, yes, all right!" Fullmer replied indignantly. "From now on, you're Darling." "Cost!"

Covington winced in stunned amazement at the sound of the new voice. No, he thought It can't be...

It was. Asche Hartov, a tall, thin, almost cadaverous Nath mine owner, with whom both he and Fullmer had had less than straightforward dealings, was coming toward them. And that was not Pryce's only new problem. In order to maintain the secret of Fullmer's interest in Hartov's ore deposits, Pryce Covington had told Hartov that his name was Cost Privington.

"Cost!" Hartov called again loudly.

"I'll get your bill immediately, sir," replied Sheyrhen Karkober, scurrying off. "Bill?" echoed Hartov. "No," said Fullmer. "Darling." "What?"

"He's Darling," said Fullmer, pointing at Pryce. "Well, I suppose he is," said Hartov, "but I wouldn't go around announcing it."

"No, no," Covington said, putting his arm around Hartov's

shoulder, his other hand on the mine owner's chest, speaking directly into his ear. "It's a bar bet. I'll cut you in. Don't call me Pryce...."

"What?" the mine owner interjected. "Are you going to cut me in on this bet or aren't you?"

It was Covington's turn to say "What?"

"Well, first you say you'll cut me in, and then you say you won't name your price!"

Covington gritted his teeth and grimaced for a split second.

"Sorry... my mistake." He kept one arm around Hartov's neck while pointing at Fullmer. "You don't call me Pryce." Then he pointed at Hartov. "You don't call me Cost." He positioned himself before both of them. "Both of you call me Darling. My name is Darling. Right?"

"What's wrong with you, man?" Hartov bristled. He always had been a humorless sort.

"Tell me, Asche," Pryce said reprovably, "did you ever unload that shaft of Merrickartian ore?"

Fullmer's face grew dark. "Darling, don't you dare ..." the trader warned.

"As a matter of fact, no," the dour mine owner replied. "The secret bid was pulled back at the last moment."

"How could that have happened?" Pryce exclaimed. "You should discuss it with my friend here. He's one of the most experienced traders in all the Shining South."

"Really?" Hartov said with interest, always looking for any edge to turn a profit. "What do you know about it, sir?"

Fullmer stared daggers at Pryce, but Covington didn't really mind. The trader had pulled a fast one in that deal, and he knew it. Besides, Covington hadn't really exposed Teddington, just supplied himself with a quick diversion. Now all he had to do was slip out and run away as fast as his legs could carry him_____

As the mine owner cornered the trader for some inside information, Pryce was distracted by the tankard next to his titanium

plate. He could see that there was just a gulp left. He was ready to leave, but this adventure truly deserved a final toast before what he hoped would be Pryce Covington's successful escape.

Pryce raised the glass quickly and drank it down, but he hadn't moved more than a step before he was frozen in place by yet another sound coming from behind the bar, where a bubbly, high-pitched voice intoned the four most awful words Pryce had ever heard in his life: "You're not Darlington Blade!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Name Your Pryce

Pryce Covington's body remained poised for escape, but his head spun toward the voice. There stood the burly Azzo Schreders, and next to him, coming up only to the barkeep's stomach, was a surprised halfling. He had curly salt-and-pepper hair and a mustacheless beard that mixed almost every known color. He had an open, friendly face, marred only by an obviously big mouth. Moving nothing but his eyes, Covington took stock of the effect of what that mouth had said.

If the tavern proprietor had heard the halfling's exclamation, he gave no sign. Fullmer, the liquids trader, and Hartov, the mine owner, were too concerned with their own business, while the shapely Karkober was still working out costs and prices. The other patrons in the restaurant and along the horseshoe-shaped bar showed no sign of having heard anything out of the ordinary.

Not standing on ceremony, Pryce ran forward with his arms wide until he stood directly in front of the halfling. "My dear fellow," he said pleasantly, "of course I am not Darlington Blade."

"I—you—" the almost four-foot-tall halfling sputtered. "Would Darlington Blade allow a woman to throw wine in his face?" Pryce asked him expansively. "But—"

"Would Darlington Blade sit alone in such a distinguished

establishment as this?" Pryce interrupted the flustered little fellow. "But you're not—"

"No, I am not the Darlington Blade you know," Pryce said gravely. "I have changed. I'm different."

"You haven't-um, I mean, you have—" The halfling continued to grope for words. "I mean, you are—you aren't—"

"Aren't the same as when you saw me last?" Pryce shook his head sadly but kept talking quickly. "No, I'm not. I have experienced much ... learned much." He threw his arms wide again. "I'm a completely new Darlington Blade!"

The halfling was reduced to pointing, his head turning from Pryce to Azzo. "But, you're not—he's not—"

"Not willing to talk privately with you, old friend?" Pryce interjected. "No, I will never change that much. How could you even think that? In fact, let us go talk, person to person, this very moment!"

Pryce moved between the proprietor and his wine expert, put his hands under the halfling's arms, and half-dragged, half-carried him until he came to a small open trapdoor on the far side of the bar.

Just as the halfling started to recover from the surprise, Covington dangled the winemaster's hairy, shoeless feet over the opening and dropped him. Then he grabbed the lip of the trapdoor and jumped, ignoring the ladder that ran between the door opening and the dirt floor of the grotto. As he fell, he closed the thick wooden door after him.

Twelve feet below, Pryce found himself directly in front of the stunned halfling. The little fellow sat on a small barrel placed beneath the trap door. "Please, please, please!" Pryce begged

quickly and quietly, his hands together in supplication. "Don't expose me. It's all a misunderstanding—an innocent accident. I won't hurt you. Just don't say anything... not yet!"

"The trapdoor opened a crack, and the proprietor's face appeared. "Gheevy? Is everything all right?" Schreders

asked tentatively.

Pryce's head whipped toward the sound of the bartender's voice, then whipped back toward the halfling, fervently praying. The halfling looked at Pryce's desperate face for a moment, then replied, "Everything is fine, Azzo. We're just talking over ... old times. You've heard how entertaining a storyteller Blade can be."

Pryce moved his lips, thanking the halfling silently and effusively.

"Oh, heh, heh, of course," chuckled the barkeep. "Just checking. Take all the time you need, fellows!" Schreders closed the trapdoor just as Pryce dropped to his knees and kissed one of the halfling's hairy feet.

"Don't do that!" the halfling cried, pulling his leg back.

"Sorry," said Pryce, scooting backward on his knees to lean against another barrel. "It's just all been so ... so stressful." Quickly he took in his surroundings.

One wall of the grotto was lined with aging casks. Some were installed right in the wall, others were stacked upright, while still others lay on their sides. Directly across from Pryce was a long line of wrought-iron wine racks, the bottles held at an angle. On a wide shelf stood a maze of multicolored glassware, each stoppered glass holding a different rare, esoteric liquid within it.

The ceiling of the grotto was made of both natural stone and wood. It was fairly high—almost eighteen feet in places. It stretched off in different directions into the gloom. The central area where they were now, however, was a mere twelve feet or so beneath the trapdoor and was dramatically lit by, Pryce guessed, a continual light spell of some kind.

"What's all this about?" the halfling asked, his eyebrows wrinkling with concern. "Who are you, anyway? You're certainly not Darlington Blade."

'You have a firm grasp of the obvious," Pryce said dryly. When the halfling looked affronted, Covington quickly continued. "Sorry. Just blowing off some pent-up tension. My

real name isn't as relevant, however, as the question how do you know?"

"What do you mean?" asked the halfling, taken aback.

Pryce took a moment to study the fellow carefully. He was wearing a dark, soft, comfortable-looking shirt that cinched loosely at his neck and wrists. Matching loose pants of some similar soft fiber cinched more tightly at his ankles. Over the shirt was a long vest with three pockets on each side, the top left one displaying the stitched legend Gheevy Wotfirr and under that. Af Your Service.

"Well, Gheevy," Pryce said affably, "everyone else in this town—including its official gatekeeper, a top-ranked inquisitrix, the owner of its most popular gathering place, and the daughter of the man's own teacher!—have never laid eyes on this Blade person, but apparently you have."

"Well, everybody knows me," the halfling said.

"Did Darlington Blade drink with you in the privacy of this grotto? Because no one upstairs seems to have seen him."

"No," the halfling began hastily. "You see, I deliver wine all over the area. That's how everyone knows me. And I—I used to make some deliveries to a predetermined place outside the wall for Geerling Ambersong and—"

"Don't say it," Pryce implored. "Let me guess ... the person I'm not"

Wotfirr nodded.

"So," Pryce continued wearily, "did you all sing songs around the campfire?"

"Now, now," chided Gheevy Wotfirr. "There's no need for sarcasm, my good man. Geerling Ambersong wanted Darlington

Blade's identity to be kept a strict secret until he personally presented him to the Lallor citizenry at the Fall Festival. My seeing him was a complete accident. I only caught a glimpse of him through some trees." The halfling shook his head sadly. "And ever since that moment, I've wished I hadn't."

"Me, too," said Pryce dryly. "Why the Fall Festival? What's

the big secret?"

"Oh," Wotfirr said with renewed spirit. "Mage Ambersong had a sincere desire to improve the lot of the people of Halruaa. But he was getting older, and he wanted his successor to be ready... and undistracted by the entreaties of many in Lallor who would seek favor with a new primary mage."

"Hmmm," Covington considered. "And with his identity a secret, he could travel without attracting undue attention ... as long as he removed this blasted cloak, of course!"

"Mage Ambersong showed the cloak to the people at last year's Fall Festival," Wotfirr explained. " 'By this cloak you will know him,' he said."

"Just my luck," Pryce said miserably. "I assure you, Gheevy, that I came into possession of this cloak completely by accident and was totally innocent of any malice aforethought. If I had known what it meant and what it represented, I never would have touched it, but it was windy and wet and cold, and, well..." Covington let his words trail off into silence.

"If it's any help," the grotto manager said quietly, "I believe you. But who are you?"

Pryce glanced at the earnest halfling. "Trust me, the name would be meaningless to you ... just a bunch of syllables you would be better off not knowing. Or, to put it more truthfully, / would be better off if you didn't know. For the shortest time it takes to figure out a way out of this, please just call me anything but Darlington Blade."

"Very well... friend... I understand. But what are you going to do now?"

"Well," Pryce said briskly, standing up and brushing off his trousers, "The way I see it, there's nothing to do but cut my losses, try to prevent any more trouble, and go back where I came from, never to be seen in these parts again."

"But—but you can't!" Gheevy blurted suddenly.

Pryce looked at the halfling askew. "Why not? I grant you, the eye at the gate might be a problem, but—"

"No, you can't just leave now!"

"Oh, but I can, my dear Gheevy," Covington said patiently.

"That is, if you'll be kind enough not to say anything."

"No," the halfling said, agitated. "It's not me. It's you. It's Darlington Blade!"

"I told you not to call me that!"

"No, you don't understand! They'd hunt you down to the ends of Toril!" "Who would?"

"The wizards. The mages. The inquisitrixes. Berridge Lymwich!"

"Why?" Pryce asked in anguish. "All I did was borrow a cloak! I'll put it back!"

"It's too late! All those people you mentioned. They saw you. They called you... by that name. You didn't disagree. Don't you understand? Impersonating a mage is punishable by death!"

The wine grotto was silent for what seemed like minutes.

A variety of emotions shot through Pryce Covington's brain, but none showed on his expressionless face. Gheevy Wotfirr looked up at him in concern but said no more.

Finally the silence was broken by Pryce's quiet, considerate, careful words.

"Oh, dear."

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, my."

"What are you going to do?" "Oh, no."

Gheevy felt impelled to dispel the paralyzing mood that was filling the grotto. He gathered his courage and addressed the stunned man the only way he could. "Blade?"

"Yes?" said Pryce immediately, snapping out of his shock.

"What are you going to do?"

"Carry on," Covington snapped. "With style." He acted as if absolutely nothing was wrong. "All right, my dear Wotfirr, do you have any idea what Geerling Ambersong had in mind for Darlington Bl—I mean, for me?"

Wotfirr tried to speak but found he wasn't up to the

challenge. He shook his head vigorously.

"Do you have any idea where this Geerling Ambersong is?"

Gheevy shook his head again, then suddenly stopped and looked hopeful. "But I can show you where I delivered the ale and grog," he offered. "He might be close by."

Covington wasn't impressed. "Let me guess," he said aridly. "The Mark of the Question?"

Gheevy's mouth dropped open. "That's incredible!" he burbled. "How did you know that?"

"Rudimentary, my dear Gheevy," Covington said airily, waving away the question with mock refinement. Then he abruptly leaned toward the halfling. "Where do you think I found this cloak?" he asked, then murmured, "Among other things..."

"I beg your pardon?"

Instead of answering, Pryce fell miserably to his knees. Unable to remain oblivious any longer, he let despair wash over him, driving him to his elbows, his face in his hands. For a time, the only sounds in the grotto were Covington's groans. Finally, cupping the side of his head, he looked over at the halfling. "I wonder... can I trust you?"

The halfling straightened to his full height, his chin rising.

"Never trust a person by his words," he intoned. "Only by his actions. You will note that I have not, and will not, turn you in. I will not have your death on my conscience for what I believe was an entirely innocent act." He nodded with certainty. "I believe your remorse and confusion to be genuine." Then he smiled kindly, with a small twinkle in his eye. "As is my pity for you, poor man."

Pryce rose to his knees. "Thank you. I try. Now, would you mind doing me a small favor?"

"What have you gotten me into?" Gheevy Wotfirr complained into the night upon seeing the two corpses.

"Nothing!" Pryce insisted, motioning for the halfling to keep his voice down. "I just need your advice."

"Well, then, my advice is not to have involved me in the first

place!" the halfling retorted. "Oh dear, oh, dear. This is just awful!"

They had left Lallor under the cover of moonlight and the shadow of ale barrels. "Good friends" Gheevy Wotfirr and Darlington Blade had passed below the eye at the gate, carrying refreshments for their mutual friend and Blade's teacher, Geerling Ambersong.

"But what if Inquisitrix Lymwich tries to follow us?" Gheevy had worried. "Or tries to get a wizard to track our steps?"

"I'm counting on Blade's... I mean, my reputation to make her think that any attempt would be futile. If Lallor is truly Halruaa's exclusive retreat, most of the wizards will be staying at vacation castles. I hope they're not interested in being bothered. Besides, they would hardly dare to show up the city's primary mage."

His reasoning had seemed logical enough, and all went well until they reached the tree. Then the halfling became a trifle unreasonable.

"Do you know who that is?" Wotfirr wheezed, pointing excitedly at the second man.

"Don't tell me," Pryce replied sarcastically. "Fm keen to guess." "It's Darlington Blade!"

"Shush!" Covington pleaded, then tried to distract the excitable halfling by pointing at the first man. "Do you know who that is?*

To Pryce's surprise, Wotfirr said matter-of-factly, "Oh, that's just Gamor Turkal. But what are we going to do about—"

"Just Gamor Turkal?" Pryce interrupted. "What's so unimportant about Gamor Turkal?"

"Well, if you must know," Wotfirr began hesitantly, "Turkal wasn't exactly well liked around here. No one, myself included, could understand why Mage Ambersong insisted that he be treated with such deference and respect. Turkal certainly didn't treat anyone else that way."

Covington nodded with recognition. Given the situation, he could well imagine Gamor acting arrogant. "But he was my

partner," Pryce said somberly. "And when your partner is killed, you're supposed to do something about it."

Wotfirr let that sink in for a moment, then replied helplessly, "Okay. What?" It was the halfling's turn to drop to his haunches and put his head in his hands. "I promised not to turn you in," he said miserably, "and I can't, I won't, have your punishment on my conscience... but, oh, if only the Council of Elders weren't so intractable in their laws!"

Pryce felt sorry for the little man, so he tried to find a way out for both of them. "Gheevy, I brought you here because I have to know what is possible and what isn't. Gamor was hanging by his neck from this branch." He pointed at the bent branch of the tree. "And Darlington Blade was sitting right there, leaning against the trunk."

"Where?" Gheevy asked.

"Here," Covington replied, showing him. "Do you think it's possible that somehow Gamor accidentally killed Darlington Blade and hanged himself in remorse?" "What?"

"Well, it sort of fits," Pryce said defensively. "Gamor does some incredibly stupid thing that gets Blade killed, and rather than face the wrath of Geerling Ambersong, he hangs himself."

"But how does that explain the mage's disappearance?"

Pryce looked at him blankly for a few seconds, then continued. "All right, how about this? Geerling takes one look at the scene and realizes that Gamor has caused Darlington's death and has killed himself. The mage is so devastated by the death of his student that he wanders away, overcome with grief. And remember, it was Ambersong himself who insisted that Gamor be treated with respect, so the mage would also feel remorse at his own complicity in the death of his favorite disciple. It would be enough to drive anyone over the edge."

For a moment, Wotfirr stared with disbelief into Pryce's hopeful face, and then his expression turned sour. "The Council of Elders and the inquisitrixes would never believe

that Gamor Turkal could do such a thing." The halfling shook his head sadly. "Handsome? Yes. Smooth-talking? Yes. But intelligent enough to kill Blade on purpose or stupid enough to kill Blade by accident ... ?" The halfling looked helplessly up at Pryce. "Besides, where's your proof? Was there a suicide note? They're not going to simply accept our word for it, you know."

Pryce recognized the truth of the halfling's words. "I could try to find Geerling Ambersong," he mused. "He couldn't have gone far...."

"But what if you're wrong?" Gheevy pointed out. "What if you find him and that's not what occurred? What happens to you then?"

Covington thought about it and didn't like the conclusions he reached. As before, the odds were just too great. "Good point," he said, sitting down disconsolately next to the halfling. He considered his situation for a short time, hardly enjoying the cool,

clean night air. "There're only four things I can do," he concluded. "One, run and take my chances."

"You wouldn't stand a chance," said Wotfirr ruefully.

"True," said Pryce. "There're only three things I can do. One, find Geerling Ambersong and beg for mercy."

"Not much hope of that," said Wotfirr. "On either count, I'm afraid."

"Also true. So there're only two things I can do. One, stay and continue the impersonation, hoping nobody finds me out."

"And Geerling Ambersong never returns," Wotfirr reminded him.

"And Ambersong never returns."

"Unlikely," the halfling commented. "Besides, from what you told me, you nearly were caught twice in the tavern."

"True again." Covington sighed. "So there really is only one thing I can do."

"And what is that?" Wotfirr asked curiously.

"Find some proof," Pryce said flatly, leaning back against the tree's tangled network of aboveground roots. Suddenly he froze in place as he spotted something close to the tree trunk. "What's this?"

"What's what?" Gheevy inquired, leaning back.

"Look here, Gheevy, in the space between these roots." Pryce turned over on his hands and knees and gripped a loop of a root that rose from the loose dirt.

"What is it, Blade?" Wotfirr inquired, straining to see what had so interested Covington.

Pryce looked up at the night sky and then down again. "This afternoon's storm probably washed away any other evidence we might have found, but these roots form what amounts to a tiny protected cave. And look here, in the mud."

Wotfirr used his halfling sight to good effect, peering among the roots as closely as he could. "It's a footprint of some kind." Pryce's mood lifted. "No," Gheevy corrected himself, "a paw

print of some kind." Pryce's mood sank.

"Wait a minute," Covington said, inspired. "What kind of paw print?"

"I—I can't quite make it out. I don't recognize it."

"Let me see," Pryce insisted, maneuvering to get a better angle. He held onto the upturned roots like handlebars and stuck his head, upside down, between the roots.

"It's a footprint and a paw print," the halfling marveled in Pryce's ear.

"By all the electrum in Maeru," the bogus Blade said. "It's a jackalwere print!"

"What is a jackalwere doing this far south?" Pryce wondered aloud as they made their way northeast from the city.

"How would I know?" Wotfirr complained. "I only said I'd never seen a footprint like that before. I didn't say I knew anything about the blasted creature's migratory habits!"

The halfling was worried, and not just because he was

carrying Gamor Turkal's body across his shoulders. The weight was no problem—Wotfirr was used to hauling heavy kegs of ale—but they were moving farther and farther away from the safety of Lal-lor's walls. "If we must search for this jackalwere lair, must we also carry around this—" he paused and cringed at the term he couldn't avoid using "—this dead weight?"

"I told you," Covington admonished him, carrying the other body on his own back. "We can't take the chance of anyone else coming upon this living proof of my true identity!" He grimaced at his extremely poor choice of words. "Well," he corrected himself, "not living proof, I suppose. Anyway, if we are to discover the truth of the matter, we can't afford to wait until tomorrow to find the jackalwere. I've had some experience with those beasts. They're constantly on the move, preying on unsuspecting travelers."

"Oh, good," Wotfirr moaned. "That certainly puts my mind at ease!"

"We're not in any danger," Pryce said. "We're suspecting travelers. Like all ambush artists, jackalweres prefer finding unprepared victims rather than prepared adversaries."

"Even so," Wotfirr complained, "we must be mad to do this!"

"I'm sorry, Gheevy, but we have to find a place to hide these bodies, and we have to discover if this jackalwere knows anything about their deaths. Desperate times call for desperate measures."

"But why—"

"Shhhh," Pryce suddenly instructed, slowing down as the road approached a forest of dead trees. The landscape around them was a series of small valleys interspersed among low hills. Trees were plentiful, but their bare, empty branches looked like the fingers of starving men clawing at the sky. There was no way a gang of marauding brigands could hide behind them, or in the coarse, briar-lined bushes that covered the hills. But the foliage would be perfect for smaller creatures.

The two heard a low moan coming from around a curve in the road just ahead of them. Pryce leaned over to whisper. "It sounds like a traveler in distress."

Wotfirr peered into the murk. "I don't see anyone," he said, stepping forward.

Pryce hastily held him back with a single outstretched palm. Then he placed a forefinger to his lips. Silence did not reign long.

"I say," came a clipped, civilized voice from the gloom ahead. "I say, is someone there? I seem to have fallen and twisted my ankle. Can you help me?"

Concerned, Gheevy hopped to Pryce's side. "Let me see if I can help this fellow," he said. "He sounds harmless enough, and he's obviously in great pain."

"You will do nothing of the sort," Covington said quietly.

"But my family knows of certain healing ways," the halfling retorted. "Let me put my burden down and supply some aid —"

"The only thing you will supply is this evening's repast," Pryce snapped. "And that burden, as you call it, is probably the only thing keeping you from being set upon immediately."

Gheevy opened his mouth to reply, but quickly shut it tight.

"I say," the voice continued. "I've twisted or broken my ankle or some such. Dash the luck. Can anyone give me a hand?"

"What a shame," Pryce called ahead. "Sadly, our hands are full at the moment."

"Really?" came the smooth reply from the darkness. "How awfully inconvenient for us both. Well, let's see if I can—" there was some painful grunting and authentic-sounding moaning—"manage to regain my feet___ Ah, there we are."

The two reluctant body snatchers heard an ominous shuffling coming toward them.

"I say, I do hope you won't mind my accompanying you for a short way. Perhaps I could be so bold as to request some guidance? Perhaps you might even deign to allow me to

lean on one of you fine examples of humanity for some slight support?"

The person who appeared to them out of the night was the most benign-looking gentleman imaginable. He had a long, sympathetic, somber face, the kind you might find on an understanding uncle who would always offer you his shoulder to cry upon. His wardrobe had at one time been elegant, but now it was a bit frayed, like that of a traveler slightly down on his luck.

"Greetings," he said bravely, favoring his right leg. "Please allow me to introduce myself. The name is Cunningham, and I am but a humble vagabond who wants nothing more than to be on my way and of no bother to the likes of you gentlemen."

"Greetings," Pryce replied. "You may call me Darling, and I'm told I'm delicious in a Halarahh wine sauce."

The old gentleman stiffened, his dark eyes suddenly piercing as he turned his gaze on Gheevy. "What is your associate talking about?" he said intently.

"I'll be cursed if I—" the halfling started to say, looking up.

"Don't look him in the eye!" Pryce cried, but it was too late to warn him of the creature's magical gaze now. Wotfirr's vision grew cloudy, his eyelids slammed shut, and his small, squat form crumbled to the ground beneath Gamor Turkal's cadaver.

The change that came over the self-styled Cunningham raised the hair on the back of Pryce's neck. Then the entire scene changed enough to raise the hair all over Covington's body.

The wounded man's leg strengthened and straightened. He smiled... and when his lips arrived at the point where a human's lips should stop, they kept right on going. They stretched wider and wider and never seemed to come to the end of this character's teeth.

Soon the smile was satanically wide, but still the lips kept stretching and curling, and the teeth multiplied like

reinforcements joining a battle line. The bottom of the creature's face distended with a wet, audible cracking sound. His nose sniffed and his nostrils flared, but instead of returning to their natural position, they remained open, growing even wider and darker.

Cunningham had given the impression of being unshaven—the better to match his disguise as an itinerant wanderer—but now his five o'clock shadow had become a midnight thicket of coarse orange-red fur. His dark eyes had become yellow, but no less piercing. Fusing from his thickening hair were two quivering cones of fur-covered flesh. His hands, too, had become much larger, and his fingernails now looked like steel knives.

He snapped his head forward and back, and his appearance became completely feral. Frighteningly, his face still held the obvious intelligence of an educated human—a malevolent, dangerous, violent human, but an educated one nonetheless. Even so, he emitted a sound that was part whistle and part death rattle.

Covington knew from experience what was coming, and he heard them before he saw them. Cunningham had called his children ... full-blooded jackals, although born of a jackal mother

and jackalwere father, with no human consciousness whatsoever.

The little beasts appeared from all around Pryce, forcing their emaciated, starving bodies from the prickly brush, their skin torn from the briars. If they weren't so dangerous, they'd be pitiful.

There were a half a dozen in all, snarling, coiled, and ready to strike. Pryce's eyes darted this way and that, carefully noting their positions and making sure none started to nip at Gheevy. Pryce could practically smell their hunger and resentment.

From the moment he and Wotfirr had walked away from the Question Tree with the bodies, Pryce had been preparing

himself for this eventuality, but now had to wonder whether he had the courage to get rid of these fresh corpses and elicit information from a dangerous jackalwere at the same time. At this point, he hardly had a choice.

He waited in the center of the circle of jackals, trying not to be paralyzed with fear. To keep his fear from taking over, he kept thinking over and over, "I am Darlington Blade, master mage and hero, and I know I am in complete command here!"

"What is that you are carrying?" Cunningham suddenly hissed. The threat inherent in his question was unmistakable, and the interruption in his thought process made Pryce freeze in place.

"You really don't know, do you?" Covington snapped nervously. The jackalwere was taken aback by the man's sharp retort, but Pryce didn't leave it at that. "That must mean that these bodies appeared at the Question Tree after your visit there." It had to be that way. If the jackals had found these carcasses earlier, they would surely have eaten them.

"The Question Tree... ? How do you know I was there?" But then the creature's animal rage boiled over. "Do you know who you're dealing with?"

"Do you?" Covington countered, dropping the body at the jackalwere's hairy, clawed feet. The corpse landed with a heavy and horrible thud, face up, his eyelids seeming to stare at Cunningham. "Do you recognize him?" Pryce held his breath; nearly everything depended on what the jackalwere replied.

The red and black fur-covered face went from the dead man to Pryce. "I don't need to know him," he growled, "to devour him!" He took a threatening step forward.

Covington matched him, stepping forward himself, his thumb under the cloak clasp that had been previously covered with the dead man's arms. "Then do you recognize this?"

The reaction was extraordinary. The jackalwere stood straight up, and every visible hair on his body stood up with him. Immediately all the jackals around Pryce froze in place and arched their backs, their own fur standing on end like quills. They spit like frightened felines.

"Darlington Blade!" Cunningham almost screeched. "Of all the—" he began, but then his words changed into a night-rending howl. The others raised their heads and joined him, filling the dark with an eerie, howling chorus.

"Shut up!" Pryce bellowed. "Shut up, all of you!"

The cries stopped as suddenly as they had begun. Pryce surveyed them carefully. The small jackals were shivering and frightfully thin. Their fur was slick with their own blood, since they had suffered many cuts from hiding in the briar patches. He spun to look into the shocked face of their father.

"Do you want to eat?" he demanded. "Do you want to survive in this land of the hostile, the powerful, and the prepared?"

"Curse you, adventurer..."

"There'll be time for curses later," Covington said evenly.

"Now it's time for answers, and then you will eat. There will be plenty of freshly killed meat for you and your pups."

He saw Cunningham's conflict in the dance of the jackalwere's facial muscles. The monster would like nothing better than to tear at the despised flesh that stood before him, for the skin of

wizards was said to be the most succulent of all. But the monster knew that the legendary Darlington Blade would make quick work of any attack ... and then his offspring would continue to suffer and slowly starve.

"You would give us this meat?" he growled, nodding at the fallen bodies as drool coursed from between his teeth.

"I don't want to," Pryce replied honestly, a catch in his voice, then realized Gheevy was still prone on the ground. "Not the living one!" He hung his head in shame. "But the recently

killed ... meat... yes." He felt deep, abiding regret, but he had to save himself from these beasts as well as the Council of Elders' vengeance. A painful trade-off was called for. "If you answer my questions!" he suddenly demanded.

"I do not need to answer your questions!" the jackalwere snarled.

"Answer and you can eat," Pryce said intently, leaning daringly toward Cunningham. "Don't answer and you can continue starving to death."

The jackalwere stood still for a moment, then spun to the ground. Pryce jerked in surprise, but managed to keep from crying out or stepping back. Blade or no Blade, any sign of weakness meant certain death.

When the jackalwere stood again, he was once more the kindly, civilized traveler known as Cunningham. Pryce realized that this humiliation—bartering with a human!—would be easier to accept this way. "Goodness, sir," he chirped. "What a predicament!"

Pryce ignored Cunningham's opening gambit... and the sweat that coursed freely down his forehead in the cool night air. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "What could a jackalwere hope to gain by coming to a place where magic reigns, where the great majority of residents could easily defeat a savage such as yourself?"

"A... creature invited me," he said with shamed tones.

"What creature?" Pryce asked, still careful not to get too close.

"A misshapen creature, the likes of which I had never seen before. It made me promises that were too good to be true ... a steady supply of meat... spectacular hunting... the flesh of unearthly wisdom. I should have known better," he said bitterly.

"This misshapen one offered you the flesh of spellcasters?" Pryce asked incredulously.

"Not in so many words..."

Covington couldn't afford to dwell on this. The longer he

spoke to this creature, the greater the chance that its unreasoning children would attack, and then the beasts would be in for a pleasant surprise. They would discover that the person they thought was the great Darlington Blade was actually a mere messenger from Merrickarta with no magical powers whatsoever. "When were you at the Mark of the Question?"

Cunningham seemed pleased at the change of subject, since he no longer had to talk about his gullibility and humiliation. His sad eyes wavered in recollection. "Early this morning ... I believe."

"What were you doing there?"

"I had been told to meet someone ... that he would have food."

"Who told you?"

"The dust... dust on the wind!" Cunningham raised his head and started a pathetic, accented, off-key howl.

"Stop that!" Pryce demanded, annoyed at the creature's behavior and the possibility that Gamor helped lure it to the Lallor area. "Did you meet this person?"

"No," Cunningham said sadly. "He never arrived." His eyes began to become bloodshot. "Nor did the food ..." Covington heard the young jackals behind him start to snarl deep in their throats. He was rapidly running out of time... and questions.

"Did you see anyone... anyone at all?" he asked sharply, hoping to uncover at least some other lead or clue for his trouble.

"Oh, yes," said Cunningham abjectly. "Oh, yes, there were others by the tree of mystery, but they weren't for me and my kin.... The wind told me that their meat was not for the likes of ussssss!"

Pryce was losing him. He could see it in Cunningham's changing face, smell it in the sickly stench of starvation that surrounded him, and feel it in his very bones. "Who was it?" he said quickly. "Who did you see?"

'The little big lady," Cunningham said in a dangerous singsong voice, his head beginning to tip this way and that. "The great defender of Mystra, with her arrogant airs and tightly coiled muscles. Not much meat on that one, but I'm sure what there is is ssssssucculent_____"

Lymwich, Pryce thought. He's got to be talking about Berridge Lymwich. But what was she doing there? "Anyone else?" he pressed urgently. "Who else?"

'The great captain of industry!" Cunningham bayed at the sky. "The sailor on the pirate sea! His little chin spike a-quivering and a-quaking, his long lip curls a-shaking and a-shimmying with his pomposssssity. Oh, the meat on him ... all the lusssssscious meat on him!" The jackals all around Pryce started to bark and yip excitedly.

Fullmer the wine trader, Pryce marveled. The plot was rapidly thickening. "Anyone else?" Covington asked, moving carefully back and off to the side.

"That is all, O mighty Blade!" Cunningham called. "Our emissssssary, and our meal, did not arrive, nor did any unwary sssssoul. My children and my craving called, sssso I had to go. I had to run, ssssscreaming in my frussssstration and failure!" He threw his head back and cried into the night. "O demons below and gods above, I do hunger! Does not even a creature as wretched as I deserve some measure of pity?"

"Pity, no!" Pryce yelled at him. "Sustenance, yes! At least for now." He grabbed the still-unconscious halfling's arms and, with

one mighty pull, jerked Gheevy Wotfirr onto his back. "Remember my mercy, jackalwere!"

Then Pryce Covington ran madly into the night, leaving the corpses behind. The sound of slavering beasts diminished behind him as he ran, but it would never again leave his memory.

CHAPTER FIVE
Blade Runner

"What did you do? What did you do?" Gheevy Wotfirr lamented for the third and fourth time as they trudged back to the Lallor Gate.

"Dash it all, Gheevy," Pryce exclaimed, catching himself using Cunningham's phrase, "it had to be done! As terrible as it is, they were dead, and we're still alive. I wish I could do something about the former, but I intend to maintain the latter. It was the only way."

"But—but—"

"You tell me. What else could I have done?"

They walked, empty-handed, through the dark night. The barrels of ale and mead they had carried out were left at the Mark of the Question in lieu of bodies.

"We could have buried them," Wotfirr said wearily.

"Where?" countered Pryce, "And for how long?" He was talking fervently as they tramped down the gem-studded road to the Lallor Gate. "You know as well as I do that a freshly dug grave

would be child's play for any wizard or inquisitrix to find. I couldn't take the chance. It would mean my life." Pryce could see Wotfirr was still despairing, so he tried another tack. "It was too late to help them, Gheevy. I hate to admit that, but there it is. In order to avenge their deaths, I have to stay alive long enough to do it. This was the only way!"

The halfling looked at Covington with begrudging acceptance. "You know, you are probably correct, but, my stars, you can be pretty egotistical."

Pryce looked at him with a purposely blank expression.

"What's your point?"

Wotfirr laughed in spite of himself, although the sound ended in a wheeze. "You are amazing."

"Looks as if I have to be," Pryce said with resignation.

They trudged on for a few moments more, shuffling their feet along the road. Finally Gheevy grunted, "Well, you did save my life, I suppose_____"

"Don't forget," Covington replied miserably, "I also put it in

danger in the first place."

"But I was the one who said I knew where the jackal lair might be."

"And I was the one who dragged you out here in the first place."

Wotfirr suddenly pulled up short. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but are you trying to get me to blame you?"

Covington stopped a few feet farther on and turned to face the halfling. "I'll admit it, Gheevy. I feel guilty. Terribly guilty. I've already involved you enough. The going might get even more dangerous from here on, so it's not fair to take your company and your valuable assistance for granted." He studied the winemas-ter's face but saw no reaction. "Tell you what," he suggested. "You made me a promise, so I'll make you one. If I'm caught and found out, for any reason, I will never divulge your part in it."

Pryce sighed, letting his head and shoulders droop, feeling helpless, persecuted, and alone. "Now let's get back inside the wall. As soon as we're inside the city, I'll go one way, and you can go another. I wouldn't blame you if you never wished to see me again."

They walked silently to the gate, where the big eye blinked and peered at them intently. Covington fought the urge to do a dance routine for Berridge Lymwich's benefit. Instead, he silently marched past the eye, then purposefully turned to the right and kept going.

Gheevy Wotfirr stood in the opening. His body leaned a little toward the left. But then his right leg moved, and he followed Pryce into the east side of the city.

Covington looked back at his new friend and found himself smiling with relief.

The halfling shrugged. "I couldn't very well go west," he said. "I live on this side of the city." But then he smiled and said, "Frankly, I wouldn't miss seeing what happens next for all the precious metal in Durpar."

Pryce shook his head in amazement and grinned at the

halfling. "What happens next, my dear Gheevy, is that we both get a good night's sleep so we can follow up on the jackalwere's clues in the morning."

"Shall I meet you at your new place?" Wotfirr asked eagerly. Pryce shook his head. "You have your job to consider. I'll come to Schreders At Your Service and let you know what the plan is. All right?"

The halfling nodded, and the two parted company. Within ten paces, Covington already missed the little fellow's company. It was amazing, he reflected, how important it was to have another person around to bounce ideas off, show another point of view, and just generally provide a balance. Without Gheevy he had no one in the city he could be completely honest with. He had always considered himself independent and self-sufficient, and he was surprised to realize what a burden that was getting to be.

He was also surprised to find out how tired he was. By the time he reached the cul-de-sac, his legs felt as if they were filled with sand. He turned into the tree trunk entrance, his eyes half-closing with weariness.

Once more the cloak clasp began to glow, and when he raised his eyelids, the inside door was swinging open. Pryce stepped inside the consummately comfortable dwelling, basking in the gentle radiance of a soft indoor night-light. He sighed at the beauty and easy livability of this place. Somehow, even if the inquisitrix came for him at sunrise with proof of his duplicity, it all seemed worthwhile for one night in the kind of dwelling he had always dreamed about.

Though his mind was inspired by the dwelling's comfort, his body was still exhausted. His legs dragged him across the large, circular area formed by the tree trunk toward a huge branch opening some forty feet away. He could just barely make out the edge of a wide, rectangular bed around the corner of a wall, and his feet moved in that direction.

The sleeping quarters were, in their own way, as impressive as the library and living room. Everything helped create a

feeling of drowsy invitation. The grain of the wooden walls was polished to a high luster, highlighting a myriad of whorled patterns he found very attractive. The brown of the wall rose to the black of the cone-shaped ceiling, where tiny flecks of white, silver, and gold twinkled like the night sky. Pryce thought he felt a cooling breeze, but that might have been his imagination playing tricks on him.

The bed itself looked warm and inviting, despite the mussed bed linens, and it blended with the environment perfectly. The rumpled bedcovers were deep purple and rounded, as if cloudlike pillows awaited beneath them. A sleepy smile spread across Covington's face, and his eyelids lowered to half-mast as he headed for the bed and some much-needed rest.

He lay down beside a large, surprisingly firm cushion. Covington rolled up against it, wrapping his arms around it and pulling it

toward him. Not surprisingly, it was soft to his touch. To his surprise, however, it also smelled wonderful—musky, fleshy, and sweet, like the most beautiful woman he had ever known. If Geerling Ambersong slept in this enchanting bed every night, it was remarkable he ever got up.

In fact, Pryce thought, snuggling his head against the soft shape of the pillow, the incredible feeling reminded him of something. What was it again? He felt his consciousness begin to slip. He was already sinking into sleep when his subconscious shook his brain.

Pryce's eyes snapped open. His grip on the pillow spasmed. Then the bed exploded.

Well, the bed didn't actually explode, but it might as well have. The bedclothes erupted off the mattress, and something made a horrible sound. It started as a squeal, then mutated into an angry shriek, then ended in a piercing scream.

Pryce wasn't so much thrown off as he threw himself off,

trying desperately to escape from whatever was in the bed. He soared straight up some three and a half feet, his legs kicking wildly. Then he dived four feet to the side, sliding along the floor.

He hit the wall, standing, where he watched, wide-eyed, as something took shape over the bed. At first it looked like a fuzzy ball of mutating movement. Then limbs started to flail out, and hair spun in the air like striking snakes. Just as it seemed the misshapen creature would crash back down to the bed, strong arms and shapely legs appeared. Pryce saw that they were attached to a pleasantly rounded torso. No less amazing was the face that emerged from the wildly whipping hair... a face he recognized from somewhere_____

They screamed each other's names at the same time, then dived in different directions.

Pryce Covington tried to leap out of the bedroom altogether while Dearlyn Ambersong grabbed a seven-foot-long staff, with red horsehair cascading off the top. She jerked it up from where it leaned against the wall beside the bed, planting the base directly across Pryce's solar plexus.

Covington woofed in response, his arms and legs going straight out. He flew backward, then struck the far right corner of the bed with his shoulders. He rolled backward and landed on his knees, allowing the momentum to keep him sliding away. Dearlyn, however, was already running across the mattress, spinning the pole so that the horsehair flew wide, revealing all manner of gardening implements knotted to the top by thin leather thongs.

"Garden tools?" Pryce marveled, but there was no time to consider the incongruity of their placement as she expertly thrust the staff forward. A garden trowel barely missed his nose. He stopped sliding and jerked his head back. His skull struck the sloping wall with a nasty thunk, but she continued to spin the staff wildly. Some small shears nearly pruned his neck.

Pryce forced the bottom of his legs, from the knees down, to

straighten. He sat on the floor, letting his rear slide while his head kept going back. Suddenly he was lying on the floor by the bed, watching her spin the red horsehair, a small cultivator attempting to puncture both his corneas at the same time.

Pryce grabbed the bedclothes with his right hand and pulled with all his might. Not only did the maneuver propel him toward the bed, but it also pulled the comforter out from under Dear-lyn's feet. The cultivator and horsehair flew up, and she started to plummet down with a loud squeal.

Pryce somersaulted backward onto his feet just in time to see Dearlyn fall on the bed in a satisfying tangle of arms, legs, and garden tools. Covington found himself shaking, but also chuckling from a combination of tension and relief. Dearlyn Ambersong was extremely proficient with her staff. The unusual

implement may have made her a great gardener, but it wasn't bad as a weapon either. She could clearly use it to parry any weed she targeted, whether vegetable or human.

Here was a mystery he had better solve immediately. What was Dearlyn Ambersong doing in what he thought was his bed, and why the sudden attempt to "plant" him? Pryce clapped his hands to get her attention. "Now, just a minute, Miss Ambersong. I—"

He didn't have time to finish because all of a sudden the bed came at him. One second it was lying flat on the bed frame, and the next second it was flying at him like a giant flyswatter trying to squash a bug against the wall. Clearly the bed was magically powered!

Pryce threw himself to the side, executing a series of fast cartwheels toward the bedroom door. He spun out of the sleeping quarters just as the heavy bed hit the wall with a resounding slam.

He landed on his feet in the library, but he had no time to enjoy his escape because now the horsehair staff was coming at his face like the spear, the attached garden tools

coursing behind it like a particularly dangerous set of stingers.

Pryce pivoted, turned his head, and let his knees buckle. He watched the pole fly by inches over his head as he did the limbo as fast as he could. A trailing cultivating tool scratched an itch on his nose as it rocketed past.

"Now, look here!" he cried, straightening up as the staff hit the far wall. But then a spell struck him in the chest, and he could say no more.

Pryce Covington felt as if a giant serpent had snapped its tail across his torso. He flew across the living room floor and crashed, seat first, into one of the mage's heavy chairs. The power of the spell was more than enough to overturn it, sending Pryce head over heels into the fireplace.

Pryce was thankful that the fire was out. So was he, nearly.

Through a fog of confusion, pain, and soot, he could make out Dearlyn Ambersong, standing angrily in the doorway of the sleeping quarters, her fists on her hips. Pryce blinked, trying to focus on what appeared to be fur that covered her body from her neck to her ankles, and all the way down her arms to her wrists. What was she, another jackalwere?

No, he realized, it was her night clothes. She wore a skintight suit of some sort of soft, gray material. "Hey," Pryce said weakly. "My color."

"What?" she demanded. "What did you say?"

"That color," he continued feebly. "Same as my shirt." He managed to get his thumb and forefinger to pinch at his neckline.

"How dare you?" she seethed. "I don't care if you are the great Darlington Blade. You have no right to come into my—I mean, my father's—home!"

"He said I could." Pryce whispered weakly.

"What?"

Pryce groaned as he attempted to right himself in the ashes. "Your father ... told Gamor ... and Lymwich ... I could stay here."

"That's absurd!" she flared. "I don't believe it!"

Pryce was finally right side up, and he motioned helplessly at the door. "The door opened for me," he reminded her. "It wouldn't have if Geerling hadn't given me the key...." He feebly fingered the cloak clasp.

Dearlyn opened her mouth again, shut it, opened it a second time, then stamped her foot and made a harrumphing sound before marching off to fix the bed.

Pryce crawled out of the fireplace and slowly worked his way back to his hands and knees. He dusted off the parts of him he could reach before making his way back to the bedroom on all fours.

The illumination was brighter now, so he could clearly see Dearlyn briskly replacing all the blankets, pillows, and comforter.

She then pulled on an ornate robe of beige and teal that looked like an elegant gown.

"I apologize, Miss Ambersong," Pryce said quietly.

"For what?" she snapped.

"For existing."

That stopped her, but only for a second. She went back to making the bed as if it were a particularly bothersome patient. "You can't help being who you are," she said.

You'd be surprised, he thought, but what he said was, "Perhaps you can help me be who you think I am."

This time she stopped for longer than a second, her face filled with confusion. "What on Toril are you talking about?"

Pryce pulled himself painfully to his feet, smiled wearily, and crooked a finger at her to follow him. Then he hobbled out to the living area, struggled to set the toppled chair upright, and sat down in it heavily. By the time he sighed with relief, she was standing against the wall opposite him. "I am here, Miss Ambersong," he said, "but your father is missing. Do you have any idea where he is?"

"Don't you?" she replied, at first with rancor, then with obvious concern.

Pryce waved that aside. "Irrelevant. Don't you care?"

"Don't I... ?" She stared at him in amazement until her reserve started to crack. "You, of all people, have no right to ask me that," she continued quakingly, holding herself tightly. "Don't I care? Don't I care?" Suddenly she threw her arms wide. "Look at this place! Look at it! The home of Lallor's primary mage. Do you see one magical item? Do you see a single spellbook? There's not a single one. And do you know why?"

Pryce lowered his head, frowning. He knew the answer—Azzo Schreders had told him—but he wanted her to say it. She didn't disappoint him.

"Because he gave it all to you!" she cried out. "His precious daughter could not be burdened with the responsibilities of magic. Oh, no, but you... you are given everything!" She stalked over to a closet and wrenched out a cloak that seemed to be the mirror image of the one he was wearing.

"Even this... this cloak he created with his own hands... the one thing I thought was mine alone! Even that, I discovered, he had also given to you!" She hurled it angrily to the floor, its ornate clasp hitting the floor with a thunk. Pryce's eyes narrowed when he saw it, but they returned to her as she walked away.

She talked at the ceiling, her arms up in amazement. "The Ambersong legacy, dropped in the lap of some fast-talking fool from who-knows-where! You! A man who can't even defend himself from the simplest spell!"

She caught herself, and Pryce grinned sadly, letting her wonder if it wasn't already too late to protect her now obvious secret. But instead of saying anything about her illicit learning, he said, "Unlike many, I do not waste magic. And," he added gravely, "I do not use it as an extension of my negative emotions."

Dearlyn looked down regretfully.

He gave her a way out. "Did you ever stop to think about what your father really wanted for you?"

"Please don't take that patronizing tone with me," she said quietly. "I know my father better than you ever could. He is an honorable, fiercely moral man. He hated battling against the restrictive laws of the Elders, but he wouldn't give in."

"No less fierce than his daughter." Pryce grimaced as he felt a twinge in his shoulder. That statement got a smile of pride out of her. "But he didn't want that sort of life for you," he reminded her.

"More than anything else," she said with sardonic sadness, "he wanted a life of peace for his only child." She shook her head, then looked up at Pryce imploringly. "You asked if I ever stopped to think what he wanted? Of course not! I'm his daughter! I learned it from him. Did he ever stop to think what / wanted? No! He simply forbade me to learn magic. Forbade me! He even told

the council that I must never learn spellcasting!"

Pryce gingerly rubbed his chest. "I see that didn't stop you," he said quietly.

You could have heard a feather drop in the silence that followed. They stared at each other for several moments.

"What will you tell the council?" she finally asked quietly. "I learned some magic, yes, but after all, I am the daughter of Geerling Ambersong."

Pryce continued to rub his wounded and still slightly tender chest. "You are indeed," he sighed. She continually referred to her father in the present tense, Pryce noted. "I know" and "he is" instead of "I knew" and "he was." From all signs so far, she considered her father amongst the living. That really shouldn't surprise him, Pryce finally acknowledged. After all, he thought, Geerling Ambersong must have been away for days or weeks at a time in order to train Darlington Blade—I mean, me.

He thought about gaining the emotional upper hand by lecturing her, but something in her expression stopped him. She was looking straight at him. Her look said that she was willing to take responsibility for her actions, but her nature

was essentially honest.

He looked straight back at her, feeling things he had never felt before. He suddenly wanted to protect her, to work with her. He wanted, in fact, to know everything he could about her.

"What would I tell the council?" he finally said. "That the great Darlington Blade was chased across the room by a maddened mattress?"

She laughed with relief and honest mirth. "You did look surprised," she managed to say.

"Did I?" he replied, arching an eyebrow. He looked carefully at the fallen horsehair staff. "To tell you the truth, I don't know why you even bother with magic. You are extremely accomplished with that rod."

She looked down at it coyly. "When your father refuses to teach you the family business," she said as she moved forward and bent down to retrieve the staff, "you rechannel your energy to learn other skills."

He got a whiff of her hair as she bent over. Its freshness and vitality filled his head. "So," he said, "are you a great martial artist, a gardener, or both?"

She faced him again, only they were much closer this time. "Neither," she said. "I still have much to learn on both accounts ... although the vines that cover the cul-de-sac outside would have completely taken over the area if not for this... and my pruning." She tapped the horsehair-covered gardening tool into her palm. Then their eyes locked again.

Here was a man she had told herself many times was deserving only of hatred, but in his eyes she saw many things: a certain sweetness, a tendency toward kindness, a definite sense of humor, an alluring self-deprecation, even a beguiling helplessness.

"So," she said when she finally managed to look away. "You won't tell anyone?"

With the question, Pryce realized that if he did report her transgression to the authorities, Berridge Lymwich would

take great pleasure in punishing her. He was beginning to understand that the repressed, tightly wound inquisitrix found any youthful, strong, and beautiful young woman a threat to her ego.

"We all have secrets," he said quietly as she returned the staff to its place against the bedroom wall. He waited until she turned back to him before risking her wrath once more.

"No, I won't tell anyone... on one condition."

She looked at him in surprise, even disappointment. "But—but I thought..." she stammered, then regained control of herself. "Oh, I knew you were too good to be true!" she cried.

"I knew there had to be a catch!"

"You don't know the half of it," Pryce said, shamefaced.

"Believe it or not, I need your help."

The bogus Blade glanced over at Dearlyn as they made their way to the shore of the bay. She really was a magnificent creature—all curves and strength and eyes and hair and pouty lips. She was back in her outfit of the previous afternoon, only this time she had concealed it beneath the cloak her father had made for her—the one that was a sister to the one he wore. Not surprisingly, as far as Covington was concerned, it looked far more impressive on her.

The cape swirled scant millimeters above the perfectly maintained streets, the predawn fog elegantly curling up from beneath the garment as if it were manufacturing the mist. Her cloak's clasp was the same size as his, but bore a different design. Instead of an intricate forest of thorns, hers portrayed a sea of delicate flower petals that managed to spell out D and A in the most subtle manner imaginable.

"Why not wait until sunrise to visit the Mystran Inquisitrix Castle?" she whispered as they walked side by side.

"I may not have the time to wait," Pryce said grimly. "Make no mistake, Miss Ambersong. I wouldn't have made my presence known before the Fall Festival were it not imperative. There is a mystery to be solved in Lallor... and it involves your father."

She stopped in her tracks and gripped his arm. He stopped to face her. "My father?" she gasped, her eyes wide. "What do you know?"

"That's the problem," he said intently. "I don't know enough. But Berridge Lymwich might, and time is of the essence!"

What he didn't tell her was that the longer he remained in Lallor, the greater the chance he would wake up dead. Whoever had killed those two men was still at large and couldn't be overjoyed that someone everyone thought was Darlington Blade was still alive.

To stay alive, he had to know what Lymwich was doing at the Question Tree late last night... and he had to know now. He would confront Teddington Fullmer later. At the moment, Lymwich was his only lead, while his only advantage was the element of surprise, and his only sanctuary was speed.

"But why do you need me to test the magical defenses?" she countered. "Surely whatever the inquisitrixes have prepared in an effort to repel unwanted visitors will be nothing to you!"

He snorted impatiently, trapped by the complications of his impersonation. "Please, Miss Ambersong. If I'm so great, couldn't you stop questioning my so-called unfathomable wisdom and just do as I suggest? I promise, as soon as I know anything, you'll know."

She bit her full lower lip, looking deep into his eyes, still holding his arm. For a moment, he considered telling her the truth... the whole truth ... but then he suddenly realized that the real Darlington Blade had to have been killed by someone Blade knew and trusted. And that person had to be talented indeed in order to murder Blade, even if his guard was down. So, with a great effort of will, he remained silent.

"Darlington, I..." she began pleadingly, then thought better of it. Her fingers released his sleeve and she stepped back. "Very well, Blade," she said coolly. "I will put faith in what you say, but only until it is proven otherwise."

He swallowed and nodded. "Fair enough," he said tightly.

"Now, let's go... quickly."

They continued on in silence, allowing Pryce to further consider his situation and the magnificence that was Lallor. Beauty was everywhere, consciously designed to have the most therapeutic and pleasing effect. Continual light spells kept a rosy glow on everything in sight so there was little chance for anything to take anyone by surprise, either by design or accident. The security of the city seemed complete.

No wonder the dead bodies were found outside the wall, Pryce thought. If the two men's deaths had occurred inside, the

murderer wouldn't have stood a chance.

Still, a primary mage was missing and two people were dead. And as much as Pryce hated to contemplate it, unless Gamor had committed suicide or somehow accidentally stuck his head in a noose and hanged himself six feet off the ground, foul play was indicated. But Turkal's death was not really the problem. Blast it, Covington thought, / could have killed Gamor. He frowned philosophically and shrugged. And fairly easily, at that.

No, the real Darlington Blade was the problem. Killing him would not have been easy. Covington felt very ill-suited to deal with this revelation. Human behavior had been the core of his business back in Merrickarta, but the emotions needed to actually plot, carry out, and get away with the underhanded, petty, cunning crime of murder nearly overwhelmed him. To kill Gamor Turkal was one thing, but to assassinate Darlington Blade? That would take a dangerous opponent indeed.

He gave a start when Dearnyn laid her hand on his arm again. "There," she said. "The Inquisitrix Castle."

He nearly did a double take as he saw the castle close up for the first time. He moved down the lane, which emptied out onto a stone quay, for a better look. Coming around a patch of swaying trees, he could finally see the entire structure. It

stood out in Lallor Bay, looking at first like many other castles. Magnificent, certainly, but not overly large or brilliantly designed, considering the truly breathtaking floating castles in other parts of Halruaa.

From his position on shore, Covington could see three turrets. The windows looked like huge gemstones of different colors. They bulged out as if someone had catapulted red, green, and blue jewels the size of boulders into the walls, and they had stuck halfway through. From the outside, he could see the glimmer of light and movement within.

There was no classic gate. This castle's "gate" was a simple, unadorned wooden door with a plain copper doorknob. Pryce leaned forward, having a hard time believing his eyes, because the entire Mystran Inquisitrix Castle rested on top of a single, simple door, which in turn seemed to float a paper's thickness above the water.

He turned back to look wonderingly at Dearlyn, who shrugged. "It's always been like that," she told him. "A huge stone edifice resting atop a plain wooden door. Don't ask me to explain it."

Pryce got as close to the water's edge as possible. He walked down the quay until the water lapped at his boots. He moved to the left and to the right, craning his neck, but he never could see whether there was anything beside or behind the door. No matter what angle he looked from, the huge castle continued to appear as if it were balancing on a single door beneath it.

Covington blinked, shook his head, and looked down. The wonders didn't cease. The castle, now some fifty yards away, rested on the door, which in turn hovered over a solid concrete shelf, covered by only a single inch of placid, crystal-clear bay water.

"The Lalloreef Strait." He turned at the sound of Dearlyn's voice in his ear. She smiled understandingly, then nodded toward the shelf with its thin layer of clear water. "I've never seen anyone but an inquisitrix or an inquisitrix's guest move

across it. No one has. Even children consider it off limits."

If it could be said that Pryce was in over his head in only one inch of water, the visual conundrums the Mystran Inquisitrix Castle presented him with had done the trick. But just like the rest of the dangers this mystery posed, Covington couldn't afford to dwell on it. If he had, he would have run screaming into the predawn murk, as opposed to staying and fighting for what he was rapidly beginning to believe in—little, unimportant things like love and justice.

"All right," he gulped, finding his voice. "Use what skills you have been able to surreptitiously acquire to divine what fortification you can."

Dearlyn looked worriedly at the castle, then back at him, unsure of herself.

It was his turn to lay a hand on her arm. "Please," he said. "I'd rather die than let anything happen to you."

She looked at him with confusion, but then a strange look of hope infused her features. "Let me get this straight," she said with equal portions of incredulity and disbelief. "Are you saying ... would you... ? Are you asking me to be your apprentice? My father can't teach me directly, but through you... ?"

Pryce's heart sank. Now he knew that in order to secure her cooperation and collaboration, he would have to resort to another eminently practical, but truthless, deception. "Please don't worry about that," he said. "Just attempt what I requested ... please? Sometime tonight?"

"Of course," she said with new willingness, either unaware of, or more likely ignoring, his sarcasm. "I'll do my best, Blade." She lowered her head and started to mumble something. At first he thought it was a spell, but then he began to make out words and realized that she was trying to remember specific magical necessities, like a child laboriously doing her math on her fingers and toes.

Oh, great, he thought. The magicless leading the deceived.

Finally she seemed to be satisfied. Pryce couldn't help

standing back as her hair seemed to float of its own accord. Her cloak billowed, then swirled into the moonlight. She raised one strong, shapely hand... and nothing happened. Her hair, cape, and hand dropped, and she turned to him. "I can detect nothing," she said simply.

"Nothing's there?" he said hopefully.

She treated his question as a test of her reasoning. "I didn't say that. Whatever is or is not there, I can't substantiate it."

Pryce looked askance at the castle door. "I have always," he said steadily, "trusted in the ability of an Ambersong." Then, with the suicidal faith of a child blindly jumping into an inviting

pond, he started walking through the inch of water, across the Lalloreef Strait, directly toward the castle door.

* * * * *

If anyone in the city had been watching, it would have been an impressive sight. Thankfully for the woman on shore and the marching man, even the most curious wizard had retired, thinking that anything of interest was done for the night. This was, after all, the exclusive city of Lallor, where wealthy vacationing conjurers felt safe enough not to be examining every alley every hour of the day.

So the wizards missed the splendid sight of Covington purposefully striding toward the door, his cloak fluttering, as if his conviction and fervent faith in his own luck were enough to stave off disaster. Pryce was forty yards away... then thirty-five ... then thirty... then twenty-five. He maintained his steady speed, feeling in his heart that if anything was going to happen, it would have happened by now.

Twenty yards to go. Covington had made it past the halfway point. It was all downhill—figuratively speaking—from here.

Pryce wasn't sure whether Dearlyn's cry or the sensation of movement through the bottom of his boots reached his brain first. In any case, the woman's scream was the most tangible.

"Blade! Look out! Dragon turtle!"

Pryce's brain instantly laid the options out on the table of his mind. Run or think. Pryce considered running for a fraction of a second, but he pictured himself being bitten in two, so he chose "think."

Pryce looked to his left. Incredibly, coming straight at him, across one inch of water, was one of the most terrifying creatures known to any seafarer. Pryce had heard a rare survivor of an encounter with a dragon turtle call it "beautiful" and "awesome." It was indeed both.

The forty-foot-long dragon turtle was only fifty feet away from him. Pryce stared straight into the creature's one dark, copper-colored eye as its long webbed, spiked, craning neck bore down on him, its fins skimming the water like a pond bug. But a pond bug could be crushed with one swat of a human hand. The only swatting to be done here was by the thing's scaly, armored tail— that is, if it didn't swallow Pryce whole first.

"Run!" he heard Dearlyn cry over the roar of the approaching beast. "I'll try to do something!"

Pryce Covington spun around to face the shore and anchored his legs firmly, his right arm shooting up and out in a commanding position. "No!" he boomed. "I, Darlington Blade, forbid it!"

Dearlyn was stunned into silence by his decree, and then it was too late. She watched as the beast covered the remaining distance. Then the creature's snout opened, and from between its shardlike teeth emerged a sizzling cloud of scalding steam that shot forward, completely covering the Laloreef Strait.

With one chomp of its deadly jaws and one sweep of a murderous claw, it sank into the bay on the other side of the Inquisitrix Castle.

Dearlyn Ambersong stared out at the bay in shock. The water was placid. There was no sign of the monster or the slightest hint that it had been there. It was as if nothing had

happened.

Except the man she knew as Darlington Blade was nowhere to be seen.

Pryce Covington was gone.

CHAPTER SIX

What Pryce Glory?

Pryce opened his eyes slowly. As he had hoped and prayed, he was not inside the belly of the beast. Instead, he was in the lair of Berridge Lymwich, which held the promise of being just as painful.

"Dragon turtle," he said matter-of-factly. "Nice touch. Very convincing. The castle is devoted to illusion, I surmise?"

Berridge Lymwich turned from an oblong cavern of divining orbs to face her guest. "Guess," she challenged him. "What was it you two shouted to each other just before you were swallowed?"

Pryce immediately made up something to protect Dearlyn Ambersong. " 'Lovely night for a swim,' she said, to which I replied, 'Come on in. The water's fine.' "

He was seated on a not very comfortable lounge chair in the middle of a large black, otherwise empty floor. The floor was constantly being dappled by colors, however, from the reflected images of scenes from throughout the city on the dozens of orbs

placed high on three walls in the semicircular room. It was as if Pryce sat inside a huge bulb, with many halves of other, smaller bulbs jutting out from the inner wall, each showing a different view of the city.

"Which one does the Eye of the Inquisitrix see?" Pryce wondered aloud.

"That is not your concern," Lymwich stated, walking toward him slowly. She was no longer in her inquisitrix uniform. Instead, she wore an impressive gown of dark gold with ruffled sleeves, cinched wrists, a long, puffy train, and a severe bodice threaded with silver laces. As she stepped closer, he could see that she wore matching gold-colored

boots, also with silver laces.

She languidly pointed at a particular orb. Her voice sounded like a fingernail scratching on a chalkboard. "That view should be familiar to you."

He looked to see Lalloreef Strait from the viewpoint of the castle. He saw a lone figure on the quay, her hands up to her mouth.

"Poor Dearnyn seems at a loss for words, let alone actions," Lymwich murmured. "I wonder why."

Pryce knew why. Just before he had been "swallowed up," he had figured out how to defeat the fear the dragon turtle had instilled in him. Logically deciding that the fiend had to be an illusion, he then decided it was imperative that Dearnyn display no illegal magic for Lymwich to witness.

Halruaa had nine schools of magic, and the disciples of Mystra had erected a castle for the study and even worship of each one. The tenth castle was on Mount Talath and honored them all. Pryce already knew of the locations of several of them—Enchantment, Alteration, Summoning, and Necromancy—but not of Illusion. Even with the monster heading straight toward him in a very convincing way, logic dictated that it would look bad if the inquisitrixes had every unannounced visitor gobbled up.

Besides, the domestication and training of a dragon turtle into

a guard tortoise or "watch reptile" would be arduous in the extreme.

Knowing instinctively that it was all a gamble, and that the overwhelming odds were that Berridge or someone like her was watching, Pryce sought to protect Geerling's daughter at all costs. Her earlier divining spell was so ineffective and of such a low level that Covington was certain he could explain it away if need be—perhaps as a parlor trick he had been teaching her.

But he would never have been able to explain away the kind of attack she had made on him earlier in the evening,

especially if she had attempted to unleash it upon the dragon turtle. Thankfully, the inquisitrixes' illusion was too good: Its roar had drowned out Dearlyn's cry and Pryce's warning.

Pryce said to Inquisitrix Lymwich casually, "I wonder why, with all the many inquisitrixes assigned to Lallor, I keep running into you."

Berridge wasn't taken aback. Instead, she smiled demurely. "I wonder, in turn, why an illusion as incongruous as a dragon turtle seems to have paralyzed the great Darlington Blade, then inspired him to take what looked like, for all intents and purposes, a last stand."

Pryce was thankful for the probing riposte. It allowed him to be completely honest again. "My sole concern was for the daughter of Geerling Ambersong. She is not as well versed in the nature of prestidigitation as you or I."

"Presti—" Lymwich's expression remained demure, but the silk had hardened to stone and her voice had a harsh grate. "You like her, don't you? She is... attractive to you, is she not?" She started to walk away from him.

"She has youth and beauty," Covington acknowledged. "But she also has anger and doubt... like many people."

Lymwich turned on him, her face half in shadow. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to guard this city? The dignitaries who maintain homes here should not, and will not, be interfered

with, but we are surrounded by possible danger." She turned to the wall, and suddenly the half-orbs were filled with images of the mountainous countryside.

'To our east, the Azhal Mountains, crawling with thieves. Farther east, Kethio, the Great Swamp, teeming with beasts of all kinds, both natural and supernatural. Beyond that, Dambrath. If the malicious Dambraii ever tried to invade us again, Lallor could well be the first city they attacked...."

Lymwich let that sink in before continuing with her litany of jeopardy. 'To the north, the Bandit Wastes. I don't imagine I

have to tell the likes of you the sort who populate that forsaken area."

She turned, and suddenly the half-orbs were looking down at the Bay of Azuth, which lay just beyond Lallor Bay. "Go south and you won't have to travel far to be within reach of the Ship-grave Isles and the Stormtails, where many a ship is beset by Dambrathian raiders, monster whirlpools, South Shining Sea pirates—"

"And dragon turtles," he concluded for her.

"Yes ... and dragon turtles," she agreed with a slightly more sincere smile, but its duration was short. "We are virtually surrounded by threats," she said grimly, "and if they ever chose to target our tiny city, the navy at Zalasuu would be of little help." She stood before him, her legs wide, her feet anchored, and her hands clasped before her hips. "So is it any wonder that newcomers who are under suspicion are assigned a personal inquisitrix to watch over them?"

"Under suspicion?" Pryce echoed.

Lymwich shrugged with a malicious smile. "Geerling Ambersong is still missing, and you no longer have the excuse that he is out somewhere teaching you."

"Does that concern you?" Covington asked the question for three reasons. One, to play for time. Two, to keep her from asking him any more questions. And three, because it certainly did concern him.

"Everything concerns me, Mr. Blade." The images in the orbs returned to more nearby sites. "Halruaa is ruled by a Council of Elders," Lymwich continued somberly, "of which Geerling Ambersong is but one. Of course, there are four hundred elders, but you know only thirty-nine are needed to achieve a quorum. But even if they needed thirty-nine-hundred, we would still respect Mage Ambersong as if he were King Zalathorm's heir. That is how well regarded he is here."

She placed her hands on the back and arm of the lounge chair and leaned over until her face was mere inches from Pryce's own. "We want to know—need to know—that if you

are to take his place, Lallor will remain as safe and as free as it has been during the seventy-five years Geerling watched over it."

Seventy-five years, Pryce marveled. Twenty-five years to grow up and apprentice ... that meant he probably sired Dearnyn at the age of eighty! He filed that revelation in the back of his mind and concentrated on the piercing gaze the inquisitrix was directing at him.

"I cannot guarantee anything," he told her honestly. "I can only promise to try—" he thought fast and hard about how to finish the sentence—"to make things right."

She stared at him for several seconds, apparently trying to scoff at his simple declaration but ultimately failing. Instead, she almost scowled, then abruptly turned away. "You know, of course, that Zalathorm has predicted every attack on Halruaa for the last half century," he heard her say, not at all liking where this particular bit of folklore was heading. "Would it surprise you to know that our finest diviners on Mount Talath fear that one of the greatest threats to our country and people is yet to come ... from within?"

Pryce saw the crack in her statement and jumped on it with both feet. "No, it wouldn't surprise me," he said. "Zalathorm rules a hundred and forty miles away from Talath, in the city of Halarahh, where they make a fine wine that is particularly tasty

when hurled in the face."

Lymwich turned around and confronted him with incredulity. "You would renounce a threat to your country and your newly adopted city?"

Pryce pushed himself to his feet. "I renounce contrived controversies and artificial arguments," he told her. "And I do not like being tested ... especially with feigned confessions of patriotism. You waste your tricks on me, inquisitrix."

Lymwich started, but she did not advance toward him. That, Covington decided, was a good sign. "I want to know where

Geerling Ambersong is," she said warningly.

"So do I," Pryce answered with all his heart.

"You have his magic. Find him."

"He has his magic," Pryce corrected. "I have mine."

Covington thought the confrontation had come to an end. Unfortunately, it was only a prelude to a far more dangerous one. Lymwich lowered her head until her face was completely in shadow, and the colors of the approaching Lallor sunrise filled Covington's eyes from the many blinding orbs.

"Do you?" he heard her say softly. "Do you really?" The tone of her voice raised the hair on the back of his head. He steeled himself for what might come next, his mind hurrying to lay out all the possible scenarios.

"I find it interesting," she continued in a quiet, chilling manner, "that during your entire visit here, you have not displayed your vaunted magic once. Not to avoid the dragon turtle, not to avoid a faceful of wine, nothing____"

Covington's voice, when it came, was not his. It was the man he had been forced to become. "I do not waste magic," he said. "I respect my teachings too much. They are too precious for any such triviality."

"Are they?" she mused sinuously. "Are they really? Tell me, Darlington Blade, do you know the requirements to enter a Castle of Mystra?"

"I do not," he admitted without shame. He knew he was about to find out.

"Only a person with a clear heart and good intentions is allowed to enter without fear of punishment," she told him.

"And, apparently, you have both in abundance."

Pryce should have been pleased. The second requirement came as quite a surprise. But instead he found himself holding his breath. He hadn't felt this much dread since his father had disappeared. He didn't have to wait long.

"What you don't seem to have the slightest amount of," Lymwich continued, "is magic."

She didn't even let him have a second to respond. As soon as the words escaped her mouth, her arms twisted into a series of movements that built up to a devastating spell.

A ball of energy appeared between her waving, caressing hands. She shaped and pressed it tighter with her fingers and a new torrent of words until it became a condensed sphere of power. "Your magic must be great indeed," she cried over the spell's roar, "or nonexistent!"

Without looking or really thinking, Covington leapt over the lounge chair and slammed his feet into the floor. He threw back his arms, the Ambersong cloak unfurling in the air, and stood directly in the path of the oncoming cataclysm.

"By Zalathorm!" he thundered with the agony and ecstasy of final freedom. If this was how it was to end, then let it end gloriously, with his head up and his eyes open!

Lymwich thrust forward, and the orb blasted across the room. Covington watched as it smashed into the cloak clasp... and disappeared.

Of course. The cloak clasp was the key. It glowed with the memory and power of the gift Geerling Ambersong had bestowed upon his student. Not only would it open any Ambersong door but it would also protect the wearer from any magic lesser than Geerling's own.

Pryce was nearly overcome with emotion. He now wore what a great mage had created only for the people he held dear ... which is why it had protected him from Lymwich's spell but had no effect on Dearlyn's earlier attack.

It was at that moment that Pryce Covington swore to all the gods he knew, and would ever know, that he would not simply try to stay alive. He would find out the truth no matter where it led him.

Lymwich was obviously shaken. Covington stood before her, untouched. "But—but—" she stammered, "all our magic-sensing spells ... all our divining charms ... they said you had nothing ... nothing!"

Pryce smiled with a certain pitying compassion. "There are diviners, illusionists, invokers, generalists, abjurers, conjurers, necromancers... and then there's you," he said with harsh calm. "There is the magic of Geerling Ambersong... and then there's yours."

The perplexed inquisitrix could only try desperately to salvage some vestige of pride from her nearly unpardonable affront. "Your magic ... is awesome," she marveled, unable to completely eliminate tones of envy from her voice. 'To have so much, yet to reveal none!'"

Covington stared directly at her, trying to penetrate her mind. All he saw was blustering ambition ... and it was that ambition that led him to a blinding insight. "Of course!" he cried.

His shout made Lymwich jump and raise her arms to defend herself. But instead of retaliating, he flashed her a knowing smile.

"Ask me again," he invited. "Wha—what?"

"Think of what you brought me here for," he said. 'Think of what you want from me. You asked me before—several times. All will be forgiven if you ask me again."

She couldn't deny him, not after what she had done. Only this time she wasn't so much asking the question, but asking if this question was the right question to ask. "Where... where is Geerling Ambersong?"

Pryce clapped his hands together with satisfaction. Then he asked her the one question he should have been asking her — and himself—all along. "Why?" he exclaimed in exultation.

"What?" she repeated.

He enunciated each word carefully, reveling in his understanding. "Why... do... you... want... to... know?"

She was truly confused now. "Didn't I already tell you that? The inquisitrixes of Mystra need to know so the security of the city can be assured____"

Pryce waved that contention away impatiently. He was

beginning to enjoy shouldering the responsibilities—and wisdom—of Darlington Blade. "Not them ... you! You already admitted you were assigned to me. Assigned ... or did you ask to be assigned?" He could see by her reaction that he had hit upon the truth.

"I was impressed by your dedication to your job," he continued casually, walking nonchalantly toward the globes that lined the far wall. He stood before the one that showed the quay outside. "Still watching me at such a late hour? Practically obsessed with your assignment, I'd say. Even willing to unleash magic on an untried, unconvicted person 'with a clear heart and good intentions.' Why? Why is it so important that you, personally, know where Geerling Ambersong is?"

Her earlier shame disappeared before his eyes, leaving only bitter rivalry. "You're the great Darlington Blade," she said darkly. "Why don't you tell me?"

He showed her his open, empty hands. "Why does the great inquisitrix Berridge Lymwich do anything?" he theorized. "Why

is she so jealous of Dearlyn Ambersong? For her youth and beauty?" He made a clucking sound and dismissed that notion with a wave of his hand. "That's a secondary motive. Your primary reason? You're jealous of her proximity to Geerling Ambersong. Why so distrustful of me? Security concerns?" He waved that idea aside with his other hand. "A subsidiary consideration. Your principal envy? My affiliation with Geerling Ambersong. What does he have that you want so badly that you would risk unleashing magic on a person you thought was totally helpless?"

"All right! All right!" she screeched, retreating, her hands up to her ears. "Stop toying with me! You know what I want! You know what every aspiring primary mage in this city wants!" Just before she disappeared through a dark doorway beneath the orbs, she turned back and pointed at him accusingly. "You know that even the great Geerling

Ambersong can't choose his successor without the approval of the council!" she cried. "It's not over, Darlington Blade! You may know the location of Ambersong's secret workshop, but I'll discover it yet!"

Then she hurried through the doorway, her words echoing in the chamber around him.

Berridge Lymwich had run away from the power of Darlington Blade, leaving Pryce Covington to find his own way out of the castle. He wondered whether the inquisitrix was going to explain her actions to a superior who might have been watching, or was going to gloat over how lost the "great Darlington Blade," as everyone seemed to enjoy calling him, was about to get.

Pryce warned himself not to get lazy. He was in the Mystran castle devoted to illusion, so, by all rights, he knew he was about to do an impersonation of a mouse lost in a maze. The important thing was to have fun, appreciate the things he was about to ex-

perience, and not scream like a frightened child if any dangerous image threatened to eradicate him.

It wasn't easy, even with that forewarning. Pryce soon discovered that the illusions were not limited to snarling Shipgrave Isle buccaneers plunging their sabers into his gullet or Outlaw Waste barbarians separating his head from his shoulders. The illusions were sometimes as simple as a doorknob or a loose floor tile. There wasn't a single thing Pryce could take for granted beyond the end of his nose... and perhaps not even that.

He decided to act as Darlington Blade would act. Darlington Blade would undoubtedly be superior to the illusionary dead ends and would simply march past them until he reached the single door on the reef. There was only one problem: He wasn't Darlington Blade. There was only one thing to do, he decided. He didn't want to look like an incompetent idiot, unless looking like an incompetent idiot accomplished his

goal.

Lymwich and her superiors were doubtlessly watching, and he decided to treat them to an amusing sight, designed to further embarrass Berridge. The great Darlington Blade exaggerated his caution to make fun of any illusion that confronted him.

He grabbed a door latch, which turned into a snake, which bit him. That was bad enough, but then he watched his skin turn different colors and his arm puff up. Finally he realized he wasn't feeling faint because he was poisoned, but because he had been holding his breath. He blinked and shook his head, and his arm was as before.

So it went for seemingly every step. Using all his concentration to appear unimpressed, eventually Pryce was casually conversing with malevolent beholders, depraved deepspawn, and even degenerative, axe-wielding Derro dwarves.

"Hey, how are you?" he confronted them. "How are things at home? Killed anything interesting lately? What's new in the ninth bowel of hell?"

It was quite a performance, but the finale was surprisingly serene. Eventually Pryce came to a long hallway lined to the ceiling with bookshelves. The hall led to a large room, which was lined with tables, around which sat many worshipers of Mystra and inquisitrixes, all reading.

"Marvelous," Pryce murmured, peering closer to see the titles of the tomes nearest him. Much to his frustration, the titles were out of focus no matter how hard he looked. He turned to the reader nearest him, an angelic creature in a cowed robe. "Say, I wonder if you could—"

She put a perfectly shaped forefinger to her full lips. "Shhhhhh!"

"Oh," he whispered. "Sorry." He knelt beside her youthful, shapely redheaded form. "I wonder if you could tell me what you are reading."

She turned her sweet, gentle freckled face to him and

smiled, and suddenly he felt better than he had all evening. Her voice was like a heavenly song. "It's a secret, outsider," she said, not unkindly.

"Oh!" he said, disappointed.

"I'm sorry," she apologized earnestly. "It was not my intention to belittle you by calling you an outsider. It's merely a statement of fact. I have been created to speak honestly to all who pass here."

"Ah, so you are not an actual inquisitrix or a worshiper of Mystra."

"Oh, I am indeed a true follower. Illusions can worship Mystra as well as tangibles, you know." "Tangibles?"

"Humans. Like you. I am an honest worshiper of Mystra, as is my middle-aged self." She motioned toward a woman beside her. When the woman turned, Pryce was staring at an older version of the young lady.

"Hello," said the middle-aged version of the young illusion. Pryce nodded and smiled in greeting.

"... And my elderly self." An old lady beside the middle-aged lady looked toward him, her mouth drooling. "She's too old now to take care of herself," the young illusion whispered to him in confidence. "No less a follower of Mystra, however." She leaned over and wiped the old woman's salivation with a handkerchief she removed from her sleeve. She patted the elderly woman reassuringly before returning her attention to Pryce.

Pryce frowned and nodded. "Of course."

"In fact, we are perfect followers," the young lady continued with undeniable pride. "Ever constant, never changing, with the purest possible love for our deity"—she turned her clear, bright blue eyes toward Pryce—"and for you."

"Me?" By rights, he should have been concerned over the way this meeting was going, but her purity practically emanated a tangible aura.

"Oh, yes," she assured him. "You are able to converse with me, so that means you have circumvented all the other

obstacles designed to repulse you. It proves you are a man of pure heart and good intentions."

Covington nodded with satisfaction. "That has been said," he acknowledged. "So many times, in fact, that I'm beginning to believe it myself."

"Oh, good!" she said effusively. "You know, this castle appears different to each person who visits it. If you come again, you will not find it thus."

"Really?"

"Truly. The exterior remains relatively constant, but the interior is always changing. Its image is influenced by the eyes that perceive it, and it alters its appearance accordingly, depending upon the strength, will, ability, and mood of the individuals within at any given moment."

"Fascinating," Pryce said honestly. "Then these books, too, are illusions?"

"Oh, no. The books are real. That is why you cannot read them. They are but a few of our books on the subject of illusion."

Pryce glanced down the wall. There had to be, at a minimum, more than ten thousand volumes in this room alone. No wonder the inquisitrixes had enough power to constantly change every centimeter of the place. Setting aside that mind-bending reality for the nonce, Covington returned his attention to the vision beside him. "In that case, I will be all the more sorry to leave."

"Because you will not be able to add to your fountain of knowledge?"

"No," he said. "Because I will not be able to see you again."

Her smile was bright enough to light up the Nath. "If you should ever return to our modest citadel," she promised him, "I would like to talk with you again."

"Thank you..." He groped for a fitting name.

"Call me Chimera."

His smile grew as wide as hers. "Thank you, Chimera." Then he leaned in and whispered in her ear. "I'll tell you the truth.

I am a bit tired of all these mirages, and anything I experience after meeting you will be an anticlimax, so I wonder..."

She turned her head to whisper back in his ear. "Would you like me to show you the way out?"

"Would you, please?"

Her answer sounded, to his ears, like the ardent acceptance of a marriage proposal. "Of course!" she cried. Then, to his surprise, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

It was a kiss the likes of which Pryce Covington had never experienced. Firm, yet yielding. Soft, yet passionate. Physical, yet emotional. At first his eyes popped open, but then they slowly closed as the library around him began to shift and separate like a pile of dry leaves blown in the wind. Alone in the darkness of his brain, he realized that he was experiencing the perfect kiss ... perfect because it came from inside his own mind. The very moment of that realization came

with the disappearance of the kiss and the sound of water slapping against the soles of his boots.

He opened his eyes to find himself literally in a fog. Almost immediately, however, the fog began to dissipate, and he could see the tail end of the dragon turtle slipping into deeper water. He was back where he had been attacked: twenty yards from the simple, single door of the Mystran Inquisitrix Castle.

Pryce looked toward the quay, but it was still shrouded in mist. He took a step toward it, but he realized there was still one thing left undone. He quickly ran the last twenty yards to the door, grabbed the doorknob, and pulled.

It was locked.

"Figures," Covington said, then started making his way back to the shore.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Pen Is Mightier than the Blade

It was a beautiful autumn morning. Gheevy Wotfirr had waited as long as he could stand it, but when Covington hadn't shown up for breakfast by late morning, Wotfirr could contain his curiosity no longer.

Dearlyn opened the door of the Ambersong residence when Gheevy knocked. "M-Miss Ambersong!" he sputtered, surprised to see her at all, let alone looking so happy. "Gamor Turkal said that your father was securing you your own dwelling for the length of the Fall Festival." He looked worriedly around her, as if half expecting to see Pryce Covington's body strewn on the floor.

"Oh, that," she said pleasantly, turning back toward the living room area. "I never took that suggestion seriously."

"B-But—but Darlington Blade!" the halfling babbled. "Isn't he supposed to be staying here?"

"He is," she said over her shoulder as she moved away from the door. "He has his own room... as I have mine."

With a sense of wonder, Gheevy followed her into the living room. Light shone brightly from the many tiny windows set in the tree walls. There the halfling found Pryce in his personal conception of paradise, sitting crossed-legged on the floor of Mage Ambersong's library, surrounded, and nearly covered by, open books.

Dearlyn continued on by Pryce, while Gheevy stared, with bulging eyes and jaw agape, as they smiled at each other. "I'll see you later, then, Mr. Blade?" she said.

"Indeed, Miss Ambersong," he replied. Then Dearlyn went into the bedroom and quietly closed the door.

Pryce turned to find the halfling staring at him, his jaw still hanging wide open. "What is it?" Covington inquired. "Dearlyn? Oh, she still has a great deal to work out... in her mind and heart."

Only then did Wotfirr find the strength to speak, barely able to contain his amazement. "Wha—what happened?" the halfling sputtered. "I thought she hated you!"

"She hated the thought of Darlington Blade," Pryce

corrected the halfling quietly. He gestured at his harmless-looking demeanor. "Not the reality."

"But you're not—" Gheevy started before Covington urgently raised a silencing hand.

"Yes... I... am!" he said intently. "I am now, and must remain so if we are to get out of this alive." His declaration finished, Pryce leaned back and surveyed the pile of books around him with pleasure. "Besides, Miss Ambersong has been extremely helpful in directing me to the proper literature needed to study the art of detection."

Gheevy blinked and shook his head. "De-tec-what?"

"Detection, being a detective," Pryce stressed. "An ancient word, much more common centuries ago, before the wizards fleeing the Phaerimm settled here. The native shepherds had much more cause to use it when investigating a missing wild rothe or rustled auroch."

"They were... detectives?"

"They were indeed," Pryce assured him with disconcerting cheeriness. "They couldn't just conjure up a rustler with a handy magic spell. They detected, using detection."

"Did you get any sleep at all?" the halfling asked skeptically.

"Pfui," Covington said, dismissing the question. "Too much to do. Too much to think about. Too much to learn."

"About being a detective?" Gheevy asked cautiously. The man's eyes were just a bit too bright for the halfling's liking.

"Precisely. Detective. A person who obtains evidence." He cocked an eye at the halfling, who swallowed some uncomfortable memories of the previous night. "A person who gathers information and investigates crimes. And what is the most important letter in the language to a detective?"

"I assure you I have absolutely no idea," Wotfirr said with confusion and wonder.

"Y," Pryce answered happily. "Pronounced Why. According to the great Netheril philosopher Sante, author of these texts, it is the letter, and question, that should lie at the heart of every decision—but especially on the lips of every future

enforcer of that decision. For things may ever change, but the letter, and the question, should remain constant."

"Goodness," Gheevy said, taken aback. "You learned all that last night?"

"I should say so. Not only did I learn it, but I was also able to put it into practice and get it corroborated, all in the space of a few hours." He told Wotfirr of his amazing adventure of the early morning in the Inquisitrix Castle. During his recital, the halfling's eyes grew larger and his jaw dropped lower.

"Remarkable," Wotfirr finally burred. "What an adventure!"

"Nothing compared to the one we are about to embark on, my dear Gheevy," Pryce assured him. "I made a promise to myself in the castle: to discover the truth, and I will do so, no matter whether it costs me my freedom or my life."

"But—"

"It's not as if I have a real choice," Pryce admitted. "I can hardly just sit here and wait for the truth to catch up with me. More likely than not, when it arrives, it will take the form of a killing spell or an assassin's knife. I don't want to end up like Gamor or—" Pryce glanced in the direction of the bedroom— "well, you know, that other guy."

Gheevy acknowledged Pryce's desire not to mention the name, then nodded his head at the entrance to the sleeping quarters. "Does—does Miss Ambersong know about your decision?"

Pryce shook his head sadly. "No. I tried to tell her when I got back to shore, but she had to go and hug me."

He said it blithely, but Wotfirr's reaction was anything but composed. The halfling actually did a double take. "Dearlyn Ambersong? She embraced you?"

"She was concerned for my safety," Pryce said. "As she would be for anyone attacked by a dragon turtle."

Gheevy looked around the room in disbelief. "I don't know which is more amazing," he finally decided. "Your exploration of the castle or Dearlyn Ambersong's reaction to your safe return!"

Pryce raised a forefinger in triumph. "You see? I ask you, could anyone but Darlington Blade accomplish these things?"

The halfling couldn't help but nod. "Very well. I'll give you that. You are now, and forever will be, the great Darlington Blade." He moved closer and looked Pryce in the eye. "So, Blade, what now?"

"Now?" he echoed, slowly rising from the pile of books. "Now we get some lunch!"

"But the workshop could be anywhere!" Wotfirr contended as they walked back to Schreders At Your Service, enjoying a picture-perfect autumn midday. Lallor Bay glittered like crests of di-

amonds, the green leaves in the trees swayed to a silent song, and children laughed while they followed bobbing, glowing clusters of multicolored lights down the street.

The splendidly dressed, excruciatingly polite adults treated Blade, ne Pryce, to the internationally famous "Lallor hello." That is, they looked everywhere but directly at him, practically outlining his form with their gaze if they happened to turn their heads in his direction. It was a universally accepted courtesy for the incredibly famous.

"Couldn't you ask Dearnyn if she knows anything about the workshop's whereabouts?" Gheevy inquired. "You're friendly enough now, apparently."

"A small problem there," Pryce explained. "I'm Darlington Blade, remember? I'm supposed to know." Then he said something Wotfirr was completely unprepared for. "Besides, it's not exactly polite to interrogate the daughter of your main suspect to discover his whereabouts."

Gheevy's exclamation of "What?" was loud enough to draw the attention of several adults and more than a few children. Pryce smiled at the onlookers magnanimously and said, "You know, this isn't going to work if you can't control your interjections."

"Sorry," the halfling said, his voice quieter. "But what are

you saying?"

"You know the language I'm speaking," he chided. "I admit that the concept is difficult, but so is the concept of murder in Halruaa. As Priest Sante wrote, 'Once you accept the concept of the unthinkable, the rest is easy....'" The halfling looked at him doubtfully. "Or something to that effect."

"But Geerling?" Gheevy queried. "He's been the most trusted person in Lallor for many years!"

"I know, I know," Covington sympathized, "and I'll admit it's easier for me, since I never knew him, but consider the situation logically. You said it yourself: No one would ever believe Gamor

Turkal could kill Darlington Blade. So who, then? Who was the closest to him, and, more importantly, who had the power to slay such a famous wizard?"

"Well, when you put it like that... but, no, I can't believe it."

"I'm sure I couldn't either if I were in your position, but I have to find out. And that means I have to find Geerling Ambersong's secret workshop. It's not in his home. He had the place cleared of spellbooks and magical items in deference to his plans for his daughter. So where could it be?"

"That was my initial question," Gheevy reminded him. "I wouldn't even know where to start."

"I do," Pryce said, putting his hand on the halfling's shoulder. They were outside Schreders's now, and there was a good deal of foot traffic in the area. "You must know that trader in liquids, Teddington Fullmer. Your employer was about to introduce you when you nearly exposed me."

"Certainly," Gheevy answered dubiously. "I talked to him earlier today, when he came in for breakfast. He has a vacation cottage somewhere around here."

"Really?" Pryce said with interest. "Do you happen to know whether he's planning to come back for lunch?"

"As a matter of fact, he is. He said he would drop by. He wants to see my grotto, but I don't think I should—"

"Perfect!" Pryce interrupted. "I think you should show him your grotto, Gheevy; you absolutely should."

"Really? Why? He'll only say it's understocked and try to sell me something. And since he has a home in the area, he'll keep pestering me until—"

"Don't you see?" Pryce interjected. "Think back... remember what the jackalwere said." He suddenly took note of the halfling's puzzled expression. "Wait a minute," he continued.

"You were unconscious during my talk with the jackalwere, weren't you?" Gheevy kept looking at him with patient disbelief. "Looked him in the eye, didn't you, you silly boy? Well, anyway, remember my

telling you that he gave me the descriptions of two people who had also been around the Mark of the Question?"

"I had just woken up. I was tired, and you kept talking and talking, and—"

"All right, all right. Trust me. He described Berridge Lymwich and someone who was... how did he put it again? Ah, yes: A great captain of industry' A 'sailor on the pirate sea.' With his little chin spike a-quivering, his long lip curls a-shaking and a-shimmying with pomposity' Sound like anyone you've met recently?"

"Fullmer! But why would he be involved? Do you think he wants to become Lallor's primary mage?"

"Not at all, my dear Wotfirr," Pryce answered. "But why do you think he chose this moment to visit Lallor? Could it be that he heard a trove of magical items were the prize for the best treasure hunter? I know this man, Gheevy. He's always looking for the one windfall that could set him up for life."

"The items in Geerling's workshop could certainly do that," Wotfirr acknowledged. "But still... what a coincidence that he should be at the tree and then in the tavern just as you appeared."

"Not really," Pryce countered. "Not if he were looking for the workshop. I think as soon as he heard the name Darlington Blade being shouted, he came rushing right over. It wasn't

until then that he saw it was actually ..." Covington let that thought trail off.

"Saw it was actually what?"

Covington looked down at his friend, unable to tell him right away that he wasn't the only person in Lallor who knew Pryce wasn't Blade. "Gheevy, would you mind doing me the smallest favor?"

"It's magnificent," Teddington Fullmer enthused, sitting on the wine barrel in the grotto that had, most recently, cradled the

bottom of the "great" Darlington Blade. "It is truly a collection to be proud of."

"Thank you," the halfling murmured, raising the fascinatingly colored and amazingly twisted bottle of Mhair liquor, lovingly collected, at great personal risk, from the sap of the rare weeping fredrod trees along the monster-filled outskirts of the Mhair jungles. He refilled Fullmer's cup and sat down heavily on his own barrel.

"And so quickly put together as well!" Fullmer commented, before taking another careful, appreciative sip.

Gheevy considered standing in order to correct the liquids trader, but thought better of it. Below him were the finest of Cormyrian spirits, which aged better with body heat liberally applied to one side, and one side only, for as long as possible during its lifetime ripening process. "Whatever do you mean?" he finally said with a certain challenge in his voice.

"But—but—but Azzoparde told me," the trader replied with a tinge of bluster, pompously using Schreders's full first name, "that he only recently decided to make this grotto the finest and most comprehensive in all the city."

If Gheevy hadn't been matching the man chalice for chalice, he might have seen this ploy for what it was: a blatant lead-in to a sales pitch. "I'm sure you're mistaken," the halfling huffed. "What I'm sure tavern master Schreders said was

that he, himself, might have only recently accepted the fact that my grotto was the finest and most complete in the city... not to mention the nation."

"Of course, of course," Fullmer quickly agreed. "I'm sure that was what he meant"

From his hiding place deep in the shadows behind a wall-sized cask, Pryce gripped his forehead and winced. Come on, Gheevy, he thought. I asked you to question the man, not drink with him. Remember what you both have in common, besides the love of a refreshing beverage!

"But enough talk of wine!" Wotfirr said, seemingly reading Covington's mind, and perhaps realizing that if he kept drinking he wouldn't be in a position to see, let alone speak. 'We're here to enjoy it, not talk about it. Besides, you're on holiday, are you not? About time we stop discussing shop, what?"

Fullmer looked into his cup, a small smile playing about his lips. "Oh, I love talking about my work at any time."

"But surely you haven't come to Lallor on the eve of the Fall Festival to sell your wares, have you? It's not time to market; it's time for pleasure. Am I right?"

"Certainly, certainly," Fullmer blustered, his goatee quivering.

"So, have you taken in the sights of our fair city? Have you appreciated our impressive monuments and curiosities of nature ... both inside and outside the walls?"

Pryce put his head slowly into his hands with a silent groan. Wow, he thought dryly, what a conversational gambit that was!

"Why, yes," Fullmer said evenly. "I love this place. Why else would I have purchased a home close by?"

"Close by?" Wotfirr echoed. "Not in the city proper?"

"I assure you, Mr. Wotfirr, that I am successful, but I am not that successful! After all," he continued slyly, "I'm no Darlington Blade."

Pryce grew very still, then slowly pressed himself even closer

to the wall. Meanwhile the halfling tried bravely to carry on.

"Well, no . . . ha, ha, we certainly all can't be Barlington Dade—I mean, Darlington B-Blade. Heh, heh, certainly not!"

With a courage Pryce had to admire grudgingly, the halfling vainly attempted to wrest back control of the conversation.

"But, uh, speaking of your cottage, I mean your home, I would love to see your personal collection of liquid refreshment. Is it near any particular landmark I would know about? Your home, I mean?"

Pryce looked to the ceiling in disbelief. But the worst was yet to come.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," said Fullmer calmly. "I set up housekeeping fairly close to the Mark of the Question. You know the place, don't you?" Without waiting for an answer, the trader continued. 'Yes, I hear you know that location quite well. It was one of several reasons I decided to look in that area for a suitable site for my... as you quite correctly described it... cottage."

"R-Really?" Gheevy stuttered. "Well, isn't that ironic? Imagine ... well, well. More wine?"

"No, thank you," Fullmer said flatly. "I've had quite enough."

'Yes? Well, then... I'll just put these things away."

As the halfling busied himself with the bottle and glasses, Fullmer continued in a light, conversational tone. "You know, now that you mention it, you really should stop at my abode and inspect my modest collection. I think you would find it illuminating. And," he added, his voice deepening, "then we could discuss a most interesting thing you mentioned the other night."

"Me?" Pryce's ears hurt at the high pitch of Wotfirr's response. "Whatever could I have said that would have piqued the interest of someone of your broad experience and knowledge?"

Pryce felt like banging his head on the cask but resisted the temptation.

"Oh, you know," Fullmer began innocently, the tips of his

mustache bobbing with amusement. "Something about how someone wasn't actually someone, but was actually someone else____"

Gheevy hovered near the wine racks, his back to the trader. "That's peculiar. I can't honestly recall anything of that nature."

"Oh, you must!" Fullmer cried expansively, rising from the barrel and stretching out his arms. 'Try to remember. The other night. Early evening. I was talking to a tall, thin, cadaverous-looking chap. You were behind the bar with Azzoparde. There was someone else between us... who was that again? You recall, don't you?"

"Someone... between?... No ... Let's see. I'm thinking____"

"But certainly you must remember! About six feet tall, slim, pleasant-looking, wearing a very handsome cloak. Very handsome cloak..." "Cloak?" Gheevy choked.

"Now, what did you say to him again?" Fullmer mused mockingly. 'Two words ... two names? ... Starts with You'... ends with—"

"All right, Teddington," said Pryce, emerging from behind the cask into the dim light. "That's enough."

"Why, look who's here!" the portly trader said with mock enthusiasm. "As I ferment and age, it's... it's____" He snapped his

fingers several times. "Gheevy, who did you say this was again?" He looked directly at Pryce. "Or should I ask, who did you say this wasn't?"

"I said that's enough," Pryce repeated before turning to his contrite halfling colleague. "Gheevy, would you mind leaving me and my... 'friend'... alone for a time?"

"Blade... I'm so sorry."

"No, Gheevy, you did the best you could. Never apologize for that. We were just up against the kind of man"—he said the rest of the sentence with dripping disdain—"who would call me 'pleasant-looking.'"

The halfling's gaze went from one man to the other; then he

started to back away to the ladder that led up to the trapdoor. "I'll—I'll be upstairs," he said hurriedly before practically running up the rungs. Even so, he lowered the trapdoor very cautiously, making nary a sound.

Fullmer watched him go, smirking, and then turned to Pryce with a superior gaze. "Well, he's no Gamor Turkal, but—"

"Ha, ha," Covington said without humor. He sat on a small barrel opposite the trader. "So what brings you to Lallor, Teddington? You didn't come here to critique my performance."

"Perhaps not," the little man replied quickly, taking his seat again, "but while I'm here, I simply can't resist. Darlington Blade! Really, Pryce, don't you think that this is a bit beyond the

extent of even your many talents?" "I didn't do this on purpose."

"Didn't you? You forget, Covington, I know you. I've worked with you. And even if I hadn't, I still would have known your heart's desire. Everyone from Mount Alue to Achelar knew it. We called it the Pryce Poem. 'He doesn't want your friendship, he doesn't want a wife ... all the man of service wants is a cushy job for life.'"

The trader laughed while Covington's eyebrows rose. "You had a poem about it?" Pryce asked.

"Children played skipping games to it. I'd tell you the other stanzas, but they get a bit insulting... even risqué."

But Covington wasn't offended. "A poem, eh?" he echoed with a bit of pride.

"You know, Pryce," Fullmer continued, leaning forward, "I'll tell you the truth. When I heard the name and then saw it was you, there was a moment when I thought it might be true. That you really were the great Darlington Blade."

"Come on, Teddington_____"

"No, truly! Remembering all your skills—from the frivolous to the abstruse—I thought it just might be the case. Remember, you were a wizards' messenger. It wasn't too

long a leap to think you might also be learning something from them."

'Teddington, if you truly knew me at all, you'd know I don't like magic. Gamor certainly knew."

"But don't you see, Pryce? That fits, too. You protested too much—a perfect cover."

Covington shook his head in amazement. 'Teddington, if you worked half as hard as a liquids trader as you do inventing intrigue, you wouldn't have to be in constant search of a big deal."

"Hmph," Fullmer said, blowing air into his goatee. "And you should have stayed in Merrickarta, selling what was left of your eroding wit, instead of having the unmitigated gall to impersonate the most famous adventurer in the Shining South."

"You know, Teddington," Pryce sighed, "I think you're right."

"Still," the trader said casually, leaning back and looking at his manicured fingernails, "your pathetic little performance could have its purpose____"

Pryce looked up at him like an animal that just realized it had stepped into a trap. The two men sat in that split second between the time the spring was sprung and the iron jaws snapped shut.

"Oh?"

"Well, you know and I know... and that halfling fellow seems to know... that you're not who you say you are____"

"Who everyone else says I am," Pryce corrected.

Fullmer waved away the niggling point aside. "But that selfsame 'everyone else' doesn't know. They think you are Darlington Blade."

"So?"

"So let's take advantage of that, Pryce. I know what you want, and you know what I want, so let's collaborate to achieve our dreams together."

"How?" Pryce wondered truthfully.

Fullmer put his elbows on his knees and spoke with intensity.

"I've been waiting all my life for an opportunity like this. A primary mage's workshop, ripe for the taking? He's missing; you're his student. It's rightfully yours!"

"But as Zalathorm is my witness, Teddington, I really don't know where it is."

"I know that, Covington! If you did, you wouldn't be waiting around for the inquisitrixes to disintegrate you."

"So what do I do?" Pryce exclaimed helplessly. "Go to the next council meeting and say, 'Hey, it's my workshop, so if anyone will simply tell me where it is, I'll wrap it up and be on my way'?"

The trader just smiled. "In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Yes?" Pryce echoed incredulously.

"Yes. I know, and you probably know, that a variety of people are scrambling to be in line for the primary mage's post if Geer-

ling Ambersong doesn't return by the Fall Festival. He had already announced his retirement in any case. Now, everyone knows Darlington Blade is his student, so all you have to do is declare a right of possession."

"A right of possession!" Pryce exclaimed. "Oh, is that all?"

Fullmer reacted as if all he were asking Pryce to do was tell him the time of day. "Certainly. You loved your master, but you cannot, in good conscience, take his place. You are not worthy. So you beneficently leave the post open for the many other fine candidates. All you ask is that the council declare you the rightful owner of his workshop. And in the process of doing that, the location cannot help but be revealed."

Pryce looked at his former employer as if he had painted his face green. "What if they do a little scanning of me, in addition to the workshop's inventory?" He had already faced that particular problem once, and he didn't know if the Ambersong clasp would be strong enough to withstand a council member's magic.

"On Darlington Blade?" Fullmer reminded him. "They

wouldn't dare!"

Pryce scoffed but let it go for the moment. "All right, then, what if Geerling Ambersong comes back? What if I'm in the middle of this declaration, and he appears in the crowd and does a Gheevy Wotfirr—namely, proclaiming to anyone within earshot that I am not Darlington Blade? What then?"

Teddington Fullmer simply leaned back. His smile widened and his eyes narrowed until they were both thin slits. "Now, don't you worry about that, my friend. I have it on very good authority that it is extremely unlikely that Geerling Ambersong will ever come back."

The words hung in the grotto like Gamor Turkal at the Mark of the Question.

Covington considered several different ways to react. His first inclination was to ask for clarification. Phrases like "I beg your pardon" and "Would you mind elaborating on that theme?" came

to mind. But he felt certain that they would only cause Fullmer to get coy. He was already cunning. Cunning and coy would be too much for Pryce to bear.

Instead, Covington decided to play along. He put both hands on his knees and widened his stance. He raised his head and looked Teddington directly in the eye. "And," Covington said, "I suppose you expect me to believe that."

"What? Why, yes, of course!"

"You wouldn't just be saying that so I'll risk my neck—no, my entire skeletal structure!—to secure a mage's workshop without a single iota of risk for you."

"Come, come, my boy...."

"No, you come, come, my man," Pryce chided. "Where's my part of the deal?"

"Half the riches from the sale of a primary mage's workshop!"

"And one hundred percent of the risk!"

Fullmer's expression seemed to say he agreed, but then the trader leaned back and folded his arms. "Now, now," he said

evenly. "It's not as if you have any say in the matter."

Pryce didn't let that obvious statement faze him. Instead, he smiled. "I just wanted to see how long I could hold off that particular observation."

"You are a clever boy," Fullmer acknowledged, "but allow me to finish my thought so we are both completely clear on the subject." He leaned forward again, this time pointing directly between Pryce's eyes. "If you do not help me find, and secure, Geerling Ambersong's workshop, I will tell the inquisitrixes, the city guards, the military, and the Council of Elders that you, my friend, are no Darlington Blade."

Pryce pretended to be completely unaffected by the threat. He pointed his own forefinger back at the trader. "And then I will tell the selfsame authorities that you are a blackmailing traitor who tried to use my accidental impersonation to sell magical items and spellbooks vital to the defense of the city and the nation."

Covington dropped his finger and leaned back, his hands behind his head. "Then they would, no doubt, divine our intentions, and who do you think would walk away intact?"

Fullmer kept his finger up, but he blanched. Even his mustache seemed to droop. "You wouldn't!"

"I might," said Pryce, sitting up, "but I'm just trying to make the point that these threats aren't necessary. All I want is your assurance that Geerling Ambersong will not interrupt my performance."

Fullmer beamed and slapped his thigh in relief. "Now, there's the Pryce Covington I remember and love!"

"Of course," Pryce said casually. "Cushy job for life, remember? Away from the pain and strife?"

"Yes, yes, very good. Now, my friend, my associate, my partner, what can I do to assure you?"

"You said you had it 'on very good authority that it is extremely unlikely,' etcetera, etcetera, and so forth."

Fullmer laughed. "Your memory is incredible," he marveled. "Even better than Gamor Turkal's."

"Yes, yes, flattery will get you nowhere. Now," Pryce said portentously, "what I want to know is from whom."

Fullmer reacted as if Covington had asked him to pull down his pants and dance a jig. "But I can't do that!"

"Which means you're lying, and you're just trying to convince me."

"No, it's true. I'm not lying." The wine merchant was suddenly desperate. "Please, Pryce, be reasonable. You have to understand that I've been finessing this operation for months. Ever since I heard the rumor that the workshop might be up for grabs, I've been following leads, creating a network of informants, investigating every dead end----"

"It seems, however, that now you've found a right-of-way. Come on, Teddington, give. I need to know as much as you do— more!—that Blade's rite will not be wronged."

Fullmer was dead white and sweating profusely in the gloom of the grotto. "Pryce, if you only knew, you wouldn't ask such a thing!"

Covington was tempted to leap upon the man and use his stomach as a springboard until he talked. He resisted and just kept to the course. But the closer he thought he was getting, the more the chase seemed like trying to grab a pollandry seed out of midair. It just kept shooting out of his closing fingers. "But I don't know, Teddington, and I need to know if I'm going to be convincing."

The trader was shaken, but he nodded with agitation, his chin and lip hair bobbing. "All right. You're right, of course. If we are to share in the wealth, then we must share in the danger as well."

At the time, Pryce thought Fullmer was saying that he would share Pryce's danger. Only later did Covington realize that the trader was actually revealing that he was willing to let Pryce share Teddington's jeopardy.

"I need to take care of some things," Fullmer said, distracted.

"Meet me this evening behind the restaurant, in the little clearing among the rocks where the deliveries take place. I'll

have all the information you need then."

"Tell me now," Pryce insisted.

"I can't!"

"You don't think I know what will happen tonight?" Covington exploded. "Either you won't show, or you will... with some very big friends!"

"Pryce, upon my honor—"

"For what that's worth!"

To Pryce's surprise, the trader swelled up to his fullest height and widest width. "You tell me honestly, Pryce, in all our dealings, and in all the dealings you ever heard I was involved in, has my promise ever been anything but reliable? You think carefully and answer me, Covington. Have I ever cheated on a bet or broken a promise?"

Pryce did think, then felt slightly ashamed. "You make precious few promises, Teddington, but the ones you do make are not broken," he conceded grudgingly. "I'm sorry I besmirched your reputation."

The trader stood and carefully brushed off his clothing. "With all the other stains upon my character," he said with remarkable candor, "your smudge is hardly noticeable." He nodded. "Tonight then." He named a specific time. "I promise, tonight you will know all that I know."

Then, as elegantly as he could, Fullmer made his way up the ladder and disappeared through the trapdoor.

CHAPTER EIGHT

New Low Pryce

The next few hours were the longest of Pryce Covington's life. He was tempted to use the time exploring the grotto or returning to the Ambersong residence for a nap, but he knew he would have a very hard time exploring or sleeping with the weight of this investigation on his head.

So, instead, he waited a few minutes after Fullmer's departure, then slowly climbed the ladder out of the grotto. He tried to analyze any new information as he went, but the many "whys" he asked himself were answered only by

"huh?" or "what do you mean?" or "I'm not sure I follow that."

When Pryce emerged from the trapdoor into the eating and drinking establishment, he found himself beside a thick leg attached to the rest of Azzoparde Schreders's burly body. The proprietor smiled down at him and offered a hand. "Get what you want, Master Blade? Eh, eh?" the friendly barkeep boomed as he lifted Pryce easily from the opening.

"Not yet," Pryce said, dusting himself off, "but I'm working on it"

It was late afternoon, and the crowd was sparse. Pryce looked over the bar to see Berridge Lymwich sitting at a distant table near the door, staring at him from over a glass. But instead of giving him a suspicious look, she had formed her thin lips into a knowing smile. Silently she raised her glass to him.

With one hand, Pryce reached down, took an empty tankard from a holder under the bar, and raised it sardonically to Lymwich in return. As he put it back, he used his other arm to nudge Azzo. The proprietor turned his solid bulk toward Covington with a low, rumbling "Hmmm?"

"Isn't Inquisitrix Lymwich on duty?" he inquired lightly, nodding toward her. Schreders looked over at the thin woman, who was no longer looking in their direction. Instead, she was looking out the front windows at the splendid Lallor afternoon.

Azzo shrugged. "She often comes in after the lunch rush." He smiled at Pryce. "Even inquisitrixes have to eat sometime. Eh, eh?"

Covington was distracted by the passing of Sheyrhen Karkober. He watched her saunter across the floor, then turn to wink at him. Then she placed a bill of fare on a table where the gaunt figure of Asche Hartov sat.

Well, well, well, Pryce thought. All the suspects in easy proximity, perhaps to overhear what Fullmer and I had to say to each other. The shapely serving wench and the lean mine owner spoke to each other for a few moments, then the

beautiful blonde waitress walked back to the bar.

Pryce thought she was going to give Azzo the visiting miner's payment, but instead she leaned both elbows on the bar, bent forward to expose a generous portion of cleavage and said, "Mr. Hartov wanted me to say hello to you, Darling."

Pryce cocked his head to one side and was about to inquire whether the "Darling" came from Asche or her, but the waitress had already gone about her business. Meanwhile, however, Covington noticed that Azzo had raised his head and was giving his

serving wench a strange look ... an expression Pryce felt himself mirroring when he saw Dearnyn Ambersong come through the front door, carrying a large book from Geerling's library.

Pryce realized it was later than he thought. They had arranged to meet even before Wotfirr had shown up at the Ambersong residence earlier in the day. Covington quickly and expertly vaulted over the bar, swinging his legs to the side like a gymnast, and landed on the floor just as Dearnyn reached him. She was obviously more impressed with this than she had been by his cartwheels to escape her magically powered bed.

"Did you find out anything?" she asked quietly, her beautiful eyes darting from side to side. He placed a hand on her arm and moved her casually toward a table near the opposite wall.

"Not yet," he replied tightly, annoyed that he couldn't tell her everything without revealing his true identity. "Fullmer and I have a rendezvous later tonight, when I hope to learn something." He pulled out a chair for her, then quickly sat opposite. "Have you seen Gheevy?"

"Yes," she replied. "He came directly from here to our residence, and he was terribly upset. He thought he had failed you."

Pryce quickly shook his head, deciding to concentrate on the

problem at hand. "He did his best, poor fellow," Covington quickly assured her, then let the rest of his instructions come out in a hushed rush as he leaned toward her. "Go back and keep him company. I can't risk trying to follow Fullmer, and I think I should remain in a public place until our meeting."

She placed her hands on his. He stared at them, then looked up at her. Her gaze was earnest. "You're the only connection I have to my father now," she said. "Please be careful."

This was too much. Emotions of paternal tenderness rushed up in Pryce's brain, but in order to stay in control, he fought them back. His feelings for her were countered by the knowledge of what he had already done and his own suspicions of how her father might be involved in the murders ... not to mention

who else might be stalking Pryce even as he sat there.

"Of course I'm not going to be careful!" he snapped at her. She blinked at his reply, and then he made a motion to shoo her away with his free hand. His other hand lay beneath the warmth of hers... as long as that lasted. "Away with you, woman!"

Her jaw set, her gaze hardened, and she stood up. She stared at him a moment more, her fists clenching and reclinching. Then she turned purposefully away and left the restaurant.

Pryce sat in the gathering darkness of twilight, a nearby pillar casting a shadow across his face. He left his right hand, the one she had clasped, where it lay and watched her proud, erect figure move past the front window toward the hidden circular iron stairway. Only then did he finish his thought in a whisper.

"There's no need for both of us to be in danger."

For a short time, Pryce read the wisdom of Priest Sante. Then he ate a leisurely dinner, lovingly served by the attentive Karkober. He studied the schedule of the restaurant's employees, taking careful note of when the dwarf chef and

human dishwasher took their breaks. Then he sat and watched as the citizens of Lallor came and went, all giving him the respect of his privacy, as he was expected to give them theirs. But Schreders's was a popular place, so it wasn't long before the tables and bar filled up with the most interesting residents the city had to offer, and the noise and smoke got loud and thick.

Only then did Pryce purposefully rise, carry the book to the bar, and lean over between a sumptuously garbed old half-elf scholar and an elegant middle-aged seamstress. "Azzo!" Covington called above the din, gaining the barkeep's attention. Schreders came over immediately. It was, after all, Darlington Blade calling him. "Keep this for safekeeping, would you?" Pryce said, handing him the book. "I have a meeting to attend. I'll be back for it."

Azzo didn't bother to reply. Instead, he took the book and nodded reassuringly. Pryce waited until the barkeep had placed the book in a dry spot under the far side of the bar and was again busy with his patrons before moving quietly and purposefully toward the back of the establishment.

He found the kitchen easily. It was the only door along the back wall. He waited until the cook and dishwasher stepped out for a break before he slipped inside the swinging door. He stood in a well-lit and well-furnished kitchen, especially noting the fine cast-iron stoves and marble sinks. A huge wooden table separated the cooking area from the cleaning area. One side was filled with the freshest fruits, vegetables, and meats, and the other with the cleanest of pans, pots, and plates. Pryce's nostrils filled with the scent of cooking food, still simmering on the fires.

Pryce quickly spotted the back door. That was where deliveries were made, and where Fullmer had set their rendezvous. There was still some time before their meeting, so Covington had a few minutes to carefully search the area. He opened the back door a crack, looked quickly about, then stepped outside. The night was as pleasant as the day had

been. The moon cast a serene silver-blue light over everything, and the elegant foliage seemed to reach up toward the twinkling stars. The air was cool, clean, and filled with the aroma of pollandry blooms.

Pryce surveyed the rendezvous point. It was approximately twenty by thirty feet, surrounded on three sides by a vine-covered stone wall that rose fifty feet up to the roots of the Amber-song residence. To his left, the stone wall was connected to the back wall of the restaurant. But on the right side, there was a long, narrow, twisting alley between the restaurant's wall and the stone. There delivery people could carry fresh food and drink from their carriages to the back door.

Covington thought he heard a rustle behind him. He spun around, but saw no one. The leaves of the flowering vines rustled

in the night wind, but otherwise no person or animal disturbed the calm. Pryce quickly glanced back into the alley. It was the only way Fullmer could arrive. Covington decided to take up a position by the rear door. That way, if Teddington brought "friends," Pryce could easily slip inside.

He made a quick final survey of the area, running his hands along the stone wall to make sure there wasn't another hidden spiral staircase. He was pleased to find there wasn't. Instead, he simply found large, flat, vine-covered stones. Standing with his back to them, he looked at the restaurant's rear door, feeling safer than he had all evening. With a decisive, flat-palmed slap to the flat rocks of the wall behind him, he took a step forward.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

The flat rock behind him had moved inward.

Goose bumps covered Pryce's skin in a rolling wave, and the hair on the back of his neck stood straight out as he heard the same rustling as before, only this time coming from above him.

He tried to somersault away, but as he began to dive

forward, something hard, heavy, and painful smashed into the back of his head. There was sudden, incredible pressure, and then he felt his brain shift, crashing into the inner side of his forehead.

He felt as if Berridge Lymwich had hit him full with her inquisitrix spell. He was blinded by white. Then the white suddenly swirled with gray. Then black dots emerged from the gathering haze, growing larger and larger until the white was gone and the gray was swallowed up.

Then all was black, and blacker still, until he fell into the blackest pit of all.

Pryce Covington knew he wasn't dead when his brain started lecturing him.

Apparently it was its way of dealing with the shock of the attack, once it had determined that the assault was not fatal. Seemingly, from what Pryce was distantly hearing, his subconscious was stunned, both physically and mentally, by the blow to the back of his head.

In a land where magic was extolled, the need to strike someone on the back, side, top, or front of the head seemed so unnecessary—even barbaric—that Pryce's brain couldn't decide whether it was more perplexed than hurt.

Later Pryce would call it a draw. Actually, he would have loved to have been more perplexed than hurt, but a blow to the skull in any form had unavoidable consequences of a physical nature. In a word, pain.

As usual, when self-pity wrestled with purpose, the former almost always won out. As soon as he was conscious enough, Pryce found himself thinking, What did I do to deserve this? through a needle-pricking haze. He was so thankful the light seemed to be turned back on again that his relief nearly forced the pain away... but only for a second. Then his mind sent out a series of lightning bolts of renewed pain.

He had once seen a magical crystal ball with a storm inside

it. Through its transparent shell, he could see a small cloud from which many dozens of lightning bolts arced out, dancing all over the inside surface of the orb. Now he could well imagine what that ball would have felt like if it had been lined with nerve endings.

He tried opening one eye. The view wasn't promising. It seemed dark and craggy and hairy. It was also still painful. He squeezed his eye shut again.

Wait a minute, he thought. Hairy? It seemed to be making disconcertingly rabid noises as well.

Pryce's eyes snapped open. Something was bobbing in his vision. It was black and red and orange and furry. There were two fuzzy half-cones on either side of a hairy half-dome, moving

up and down and slavering. Covington dimly remembered seeing that somewhere before _____

"Cunningham!" he bellowed. "Get off me, you beast!"

The jackalwere leapt back as Pryce tried to jump up, but the creature knew his surroundings better than the man did. Pryce's head slammed into a low, rocky ledge that laid him back down hard.

Getting hit on the head was bad enough, but hitting himself on the head was even worse. Pryce felt as if he were sinking into the bay beyond the Laloreef, but he sensed a jackal turtle waiting for him beneath the surface, its slavering maw opening and closing in eager anticipation. Covington clawed back toward the surface, ignoring the millions of mental lightning bolts that danced around him.

"Cunningham!" he cried. "Don't you dare gorge on me!" The sharp yellow teeth of the jackalwere filled his vision like a horizon of tombstones. Pryce cried out in spite of himself, making the creature leap back once more into the surrounding gloom. Covington's cry of surprise turned into a groan of suffering as pain pushed everything else aside. "I—I don't feel well," he managed to understate.

"I have seen you looking better," Cunningham informed him,

"if you don't mind my saying so."

Pryce hoped that by concentrating on the jackalwere he could crawl out of the thicket of agony inside his head. "You were going to take a bite out of me, weren't you?"

"Oh, my good sir, no!" The jackalwere sounded mortally offended.

"Yes, you were, and then you were planning on drinking my blood. Right?" "Not at all."

"You're hungry, and you've got a brood to feed." "I'll have you know, sir, that we are subsisting quite well on your kindness."

That reminded Pryce of how he had complicated his own situation in the disposition of the dead bodies, which pained his spirit as well. He groaned again, gripping the sides of his head to keep it from cracking open like an egg. Moving very carefully, he started to get up.

"Be careful, my good man," Cunningham warned, stepping forward to assist him.

"You keep your distance," Covington said sharply.

The jackalwere, now fully returned to his human state, placed a limp hand against his chest. "You injure me, sir."

"Better I injure you verbally than you injure me physically," Pryce countered. "Where am I, anyway?"

Cunningham took the chance of leaning over conspiratorially. "We are beneath the city, sir, in a series of tunnels I've found quite useful."

Pryce glanced around, careful not to move too quickly. It was so dark that he couldn't see much. Cunningham, being part jackal, could probably see as clear as day. "You haven't been using this lair to claim new, uh... meals, have you?"

"Pardon my familiarity, sir," the jackalwere replied haughtily, "but have you lost your senses? You especially should know that a creature of my kind on the streets of Lallor would last about as long as a shard of ice in Zzuntal. I am taking a certain risk just by traveling beneath the streets."

"So why are you?" Pryce asked, hoping to gather enough of

his senses to really think by the time the creature finished answering.

'You truly are addled, good sir,' the jackal-man decided. "Do you not recall the words you left me with on the evening of our initial meeting? No, I have not forgotten your mercy, sir. Imagine, the great Darlington Blade, wasting compassion on the accursed likes of myself and my progeny!" He seemed positively giddy. Such was the fame of the great Darlington Blade.

"If you are truly grateful," Pryce moaned, massaging his temples, "call me something other than 'great' Please? Why can't I be the decent Darlington Blade, or the fine Darlington Blade, or the fairly convincing Darlington Blade? Why must I always be 'great'?"

Cunningham shook his head sadly. He answered Pryce's miserable acrimony with honesty. "You brought it upon yourself, sir," he informed him. "Even in the short time that I have been privy to your actions, you have more than lived up to your reputation." He stopped to seriously consider Pryce's declaration. "Perhaps you would consider not being so great all the time," he decided. "I'm sure the populace at large would eventually offer you a more fitting sobriquet"

Pryce stopped rubbing his head long enough to look at the jackalwere out of the corner of his eye. "That was sarcasm, wasn't it?"

The jackalwere merely stood there in his somewhat shabby attire, looking for all the world like a butler who had seen better times. "You have truly great insight, sir, but, no. I am being completely forthcoming in my appreciation."

"Thank you," Pryce said, finally able to sit up. He looked askance at the jackalwere, realizing that a full belly gave the beast a much greater control over his animal nature. Then Pryce attempted to peer into the darkness again. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"I honestly don't know, sir. All I know for sure was when I found you."

Pryce looked at him patiently. "And when was that?"

"Quite some time ago, sir. At least the time it takes for the moon to travel an eighth of the way across the night sky."

Pryce touched his head gingerly, carefully trying to find the wound. "You'd think that being out that long would at least give me some night vision," he complained, then sucked in his breath when his finger found the lump. "Or maybe brain damage."

"Are you all right now, sir?"

Pryce carefully outlined the damage on his head. "Thankfully the philosopher Sante was also something of a healer," he said. "According to him, a blow to the front of the head stuns a person. A blow to the back of the head renders one unconscious. A blow to the side means death." Pryce cautiously noted that his wound was between the back and the side of his cranium. "Apparently my assailant couldn't make up his mind."

Cunningham sighed. "As fascinating as all this is, sir, might I suggest a cessation of examination and an introduction of action? The longer I stay here, the greater chance that someone above will detect my presence."

"Of course, of course." Pryce looked around carefully, but could still see little farther than his hands. "Where are the little ones?"

"With any luck," said the jackalwere, "still safe in their thickets."

"This tunnel goes all the way to the outside of the city wall?"

Pryce asked, incredulous.

"It emerges near the Mark of the Question, in fact. From there you have to be quick and cautious to reach cover, but it is a far sight more safe than strolling in view of the gate eye."

"I should think so."

"Come," Cunningham pressed, offering his hand. "I'll take you back to where I found you."

This item of news was even more surprising to Pryce than

the offer of a jackalwere's hand. "You mean you didn't find me here?"

"Why, no, of course not. You were far closer to harm's way, I'm told."

'You were told? By whom?"

"Not whom," said the Jackalwere solemnly. "By what." Then he stepped back, and looming into Covington's view were the two most shocking faces he had ever laid eyes on.

The broken one was named Devolawk. "He was named after the creatures he was mingled from," Cunningham said sadly. Pryce, never one to be particularly squeamish about the workings of his planet, studied the unclothed animal man closely. It was still dark in the tunnel, and the great Darlington Blade wouldn't have gasped, grimaced, or scrambled away at the mere sight of a few monsters. Pathetic monsters to be sure, but monsters nonetheless.

Where the "vol" part of his name came from was clear enough. One side of his snout was constantly quivering and had pine-needle-like whiskers. The eye on the same side was small, round, and dark, but could see clearly in the gloom. At least part of this beast was descended... or stolen ... from a vole. The "awk" aspect of his name could be seen in the left side. His snout was actually a beak, and the left eye was large, bluish white, and surrounded by feathers. The thing was also part hawk.

"Devolawk," Pryce mused aloud. "What does the 'De' part stand for?"

The jackalwere seemed about to answer, then slowly closed his mouth and stepped back. The broken one leaned close, and his snout-beak opened. Inside, Pryce could see teeth... broken, rotting, chipped human teeth. "De-e-ead man," came the careful, tortured voice, ending in what sounded like a vole's squeak and a bird's whistle.

"Dead man," Covington breathed, unable to completely cover his distaste. Even so, he leaned closer to survey the poor thing's body. It wasn't even as lucky as the head, which

seemed to share its three pieces relatively equally. The body, however, was a riotous mix of the person, animal, and bird it was combined from. Flesh mingled with hide mixed with feathers, sometimes in the space of a finger.

Devolawk was painfully hunched over. The top of his human spine was obviously joined by the bones of a vole. One leg was mostly hawk, while the other was mostly vole and painfully

shorter, ending in an incongruous human foot.

Pryce leaned to the right and looked at the jackalwere. "He was made from a vole, a hawk, and a corpse?"

Before Cunningham could answer, Pryce felt claws and feathers on his arm. The broken one was leaning down, a human cornea gleaming in the bird's eye. "A reeeeeee-sus-citated corpse," Devolawk wheezed. "I eeeeeeven hafffff memor-eeeeees, sometiiimes," it said with unmistakable wistfulness and pain, "but I do not know whooooo from!"

Pryce laid his hand on the mutated arm. Speaking was obviously torture for the thing, and understanding his words wasn't all that pleasurable either. But despite the odd place Pryce found himself in, and the odd companions he was meeting, he recognized the possibility that he might be able to discover more leads and clues from this unusual source. Covington looked deep into the sad, tormented, mangled eyes and wondered how he looked to the animal man.

Animal men ... their very existence screamed of magic gone mad. Back in Merrickarta, Pryce had used what he had heard about these victims as just one more reason magic, and magicians, should not be trusted. Broken ones were once human, but they had been used as living subjects of sorcerous experiments that were disapproved of at best, or openly forbidden at worst. The rumor that many were the result of reincarnation spells seemed validated by Devolawk's strange heredity.

The adventurer and the jackalwere now turned their attention to the other poor monster. If the five-foot-tall

Devolawk was a tragedy of magic, the seven-foot-tall mongrelman was a tragedy of nature. No sorcerer had created this misshapen beast. Only powers beyond life could have perpetrated this abomination. He was a combination of more than a dozen genetic types, from bugbears and bullywugs to ogres and orcs... with just enough human hormones spooned in to make him rational.

His huge head was part hair, part hide, part scales, part flesh, and part fur. He looked vaguely like an unfinished wall of mortar, wood, and tile. His two eyes were wildly mismatched and accompanied by a stout, animal-like nose and a wide maw made up of at least three dozen different sizes and shapes of teeth.

"Geeeee," he whistled. "Offfff," he grunted. "Freeeee!" he shrieked, the rags that partially covered his flesh shaking. Or at least that's what Pryce thought it said. His animal sounds left much leeway for interpretation and made both Pryce and Cunningham cringe with discomfort.

"He keeps repeating that," Cunningham told Pryce. "I think that is what he wants to be called."

"Gee, off, free?" Pryce echoed. The mongrelman nodded vigorously, reminding Covington of a horse. "Geeoffree," Pryce said again. "Geoffrey! Of course!"

Cunningham smiled in recognition. "You must be correct, sir. He must have seen the name Geoffrey and thought it was pronounced gee, off, free."

Pryce looked back at the rag-covered monster, which loomed large in the relatively cramped space of the cave. "Well, if it's Geoffrey you want, Geoffrey it shall be." The mongrelman lowered his head, shaking, and then, much to Pryce's surprise, his eyes began to tear. "There, there, my fine fellow," Pryce soothed, putting his hand on the thing's shoulder. "There's no need for that." The mongrelman started, but when Pryce didn't remove his hand, he finally grew still.

Cunningham shook his head. "Mongrelmen are seldom

welcomed by humans. Often they are enslaved by scoundrels. Geoffrey must be overcome that you would accept his company so readily." Pryce noted the jackalwere looking off into the darkness. No doubt he was thinking of all the human hatred he must have faced throughout his miserable life.

"Cunningham," Pryce snapped, bringing back the jackalwere's attention. "I'm sure that if you didn't have an inhuman

need to kill people, drink their blood, and eat them, you would have more friends, too."

The human beast blinked, then nodded curtly. "I don't know what it is, sir. Your presence, power, and wisdom must be having—dare I say it?—a civilizing effect on me."

Pryce shook his head in wonder. He was certain that if these three knew he was not who they thought he was, a third of him would already be residing in each of their stomachs. "Be that as it may, or may not, be," he said to the jackalwere, "I need to know where they found me and what they saw. Perhaps we can elicit some sort of translation from their brethren."

"They have no brethren."

"No brethren?" Pryce said incredulously, leaning toward Cunningham. "How is that possible? I've heard that broken ones reside in groups of up to five dozen creatures. The mongrelmen who manage to avoid enslavement even create their own villages and communities."

"But, sir," the jackalwere retorted, "he is enslaved."

"He is?" Pryce marveled. "By whom?"

"The same force that enslaves me," Cunningham declared bitterly. "It lured me here with promises that would fill my heart's desire, then sorely used me for my basest, most antisocial skills."

At least one part of that statement sounded ominously familiar to Covington. He remembered that he himself had been lured to Lallor. "Cunningham!" he barked. "I couldn't

ask you this when we last met because of your bloodlust. You said that a misshapen one first enticed you here. Was that Devolawk?"

The jackalwere nodded shamefully, and Pryce's eyes had finally adjusted well enough to the dark to see the affirmation. "Devolawk," he asked the broken one, "who had you lure the jackalwere here?"

The broken one answered painfully and slowly through his rotting human teeth, but it was clear enough for Pryce to understand, despite the vole's hisses and hawk's cries. "Don't...

knowwww. Woke ... from death ... with orders alllready... in myyyyy mind!"

Pryce pursed his lips. The poor thing had been created as a slave, with instructions already implanted in its polymorphed brain. But what was the mongrelman's part in all this?

"Cunningham," he continued, "I think I know now who actually enticed you here. But I need to know why. What did you have to do to get this so-called limitless supply of fresh, high-quality human meat?"

The jackalwere hung his head. "I was told ... by the faceless wind ... to find a mongrelman skilled in concealment."

"Ah," Pryce said. Mongrelmen were known for their skills in pickpocketing, mimicry, camouflage, and all the variations thereof.

"It's obvious to me now," Cunningham confessed, "that Geoffrey was brought here to guard these tunnels."

"Why?" Pryce asked the mongrelman. "What is hidden down here, Geoffrey?"

The mongrelman shook his head vigorously, waving his part hand, part claw, part hoof in a warding-off gesture.

"Geoffrey," Pryce pressed, "are you the one who saved me? Are you the one who found me unconscious?" The mongrelman stared at him, his head and hand movement slowing, then finally stopping. "You can trust me, Geoffrey,"

Pryce stressed. "I swear on my ... name ... I won't let your enslaver hurt you." He blushed, hoping his quandary wouldn't be too obvious in the darkness, night vision or no night vision.

The mongrelman finally nodded.

"Are you the one who dragged me here? Are you the one who carried me to safety?"

The mongrelman looked up with something approaching hope, then nodded more energetically.

Pryce looked toward the others. "He was concealing me as well. But why? What does he know that we don't?"

Suddenly Devolawk started to speak. "Heeeee knewwww you. Darliiiiington Blade! Only you ... can heeeeeelp us!" The mongrelman nodded again, even more vigorously.

Pryce felt a sudden pang of hopelessness. Now a trio of monsters were looking to him for help, a responsibility Pryce Covington from Merrickarta would have rejected as absurd and impossible from every standpoint.

"Pleeeeeease!" Devolawk screeched piteously. "I want to fly-yyy. I want to sleeeeeep! I want to beeeee freeeeee!"

Pryce moved quickly to his feet and put his hands on what served as the broken one's shoulders. "Easy, Devolawk. Calm yourself." He found himself standing in the middle of a monster triangle. They hemmed him in from every side.

"Devolawk sleeps in misery," said Cunningham, "in various dark recesses of the tunnels. Geoffrey guards. What, I do not know."

Covington's mind reeled. "It must have been powerful magic indeed to create this poor broken one...." And what was the single most important magical consideration in Lallor at this moment? "Fullmer!" Pryce cried suddenly. His mind had finally cleared enough to remember who he had been supposed to meet when he was knocked out.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Cunningham inquired. "Is that some sort of magical incantation?"

"In a manner of speaking," Pryce replied. "He's a captain of

industry on the pirate seas, remember?"

"The chin-spiked one? But what does he have to do with—"

"Just enough, apparently. He's looking for what everyone around here seems to be looking for."

Cunningham shrugged. "And what would that be, sir?"

Pryce's pointed at the mongrelman. "Unless I miss my guess, it's what he's guarding." The other two monsters looked at the master of concealment.

"Geeeeee-off-freeeeee!" Devolawk whistled. "Show usssss!"

"Show us what the humans are after," Cunningham repeated urgently. "Now!"

The section of wall the mongrelman led them to was not very impressive in and of itself. In fact, it looked just like any other part of the cave until Pryce noticed a bulge near the floor and another just below the stone ceiling. Covington looked at the mongrelman, who was jabbing his finger repeatedly at a place high on the wall. Cunningham and Devolawk looked at each other in confusion, then looked to Pryce expectantly. The human had no intention of disappointing them.

He stepped up onto the bottom protuberance, which was effectively a cleverly sculpted step designed to appear as a natural part of the rock. Pryce grabbed the top protrusion, which had been chiseled into a seemingly natural rock shape, but was actually a rung that could be held onto easily.

Slowly and carefully Pryce pulled himself up the length of the wall until he found himself looking down a cunningly camouflaged hole cut through the rock. Looking up from the cave floor, it would have been invisible, because its lower lip was carved upward, like a tankard set high in the wall. Until someone looked down at it, there was no hint that the opening was even there. Pryce stared down into the hole until he could see no farther.

He looked down at the mongrelman. "Is this your doing?"

The beast shook its hoary head from side to side in reply. Pryce turned to look back down the tube-shaped hole. It couldn't have been more than three inches in circumference and had to be at least three feet deep. Pryce placed his eye directly against the opening.

Pryce could just make out the other side of the tube. It ended inside a larger enclosure, one that did not have a rock floor, but Pryce couldn't tell for sure what it was. He couldn't make out the

details because something was obscuring his vision partway down the rock pipe. There was some sort of grating in the way.

"Cunningham?" Pryce said, lowering himself carefully down to the rock floor. "I wonder if you would do me a small favor."

"Yes, sir, of course. How can I be of service?"

Pryce smiled tightly. "I need you to use your full jackal night vision, but without developing an overwhelming urge to open any of my arteries. Do you think you could do that?"

Cunningham found himself staring at Pryce's neck much the same way he would look at a succulent roast. He grew noticeably pale. Then he swallowed. He looked to the other monsters for support. "I shall endeavor to do my utmost," he promised shakily.

Pryce was fascinated by the change that came over the man-beast after he had lifted himself up to the hole in the wall. Suddenly his skin sprouted red, orange, and black hair, which mingled into a mat of fur from his upper lip to his forehead. His left eye changed with it, turning from a human sphere to an animal's black orb. Its center seemed to glow yellow, and he... it... snarled menacingly.

Pryce stepped back nervously, but when the jackalwere dropped lightly to his feet and turned to face him, his face had transformed back to the innocuous features of the impoverished but cultured traveler. "Most unusual," he commented.

"Yes?"

"There is indeed a chamber of some sort on the other side of the rock tube." "Yes?"

"But there is also a grating of some sort."

"So far we're in perfect agreement," Pryce said impatiently, "but I thought it was worth risking unleashing your animal side for corroboration." Cunningham looked at him with one eyebrow raised before Pryce exclaimed, "Details, man, details! What does the grating look like?"

"Well, actually, it looks like letters."

Pryce turned to the others. "Now we're getting somewhere. Which letters?"

"They are oddly shaped, sir, like some sort of artistic script. I could make out a U with a line over it... an underlined V... the top half of an O,... and a P[^] with rounded bottoms."

"U-V-O-W," Pryce repeated the letters aloud. "You vow'? You vow to do what?"

"Whatever vow it is, sir," interrupted Cunningham, "it certainly seems to be a code of some sort."

"Or a lock ..." Pryce mused, fingering his cloak clasp. "Of course!" he realized. "A key!" He looked down at the clasp, seeing the letters D and B upside down and backward. "In a city of wizards, what sort of entry would you devise to protect your most valuable possessions?"

"One a sorcerer could not circumvent," Cunningham said. "A magical lock."

"Not magical," Pryce insisted, realizing the clasp did not glow as it neared the opening. "No matter how great a magician you are, there will always be a greater one. No, to truly protect your valuables from sorcerers, the lock needs to be mechanical!"

"Mechanical?" Cunningham repeated as if the word was distasteful. "Can you open it, sir?"

Pryce held the cloak clasp between his thumb and index finger. He twisted it this way and that. "Not yet. I don't have all the letters yet. But I think I will, very soon." He turned to the misshapen ones. "I promise," he said, "to do everything

in my power to free you from your bondage. You have the word of Darlington Blade." He marveled at the way it was becoming steadily easier to pass himself off as Blade.

The mongrelman tried to smile, his grotesque lips twisting and spasming. The broken one, however, fell to the joints that served as his knees, tumbling off-balance to lean heavily against the cave wall. "The skyyyyy," it choked out. "The eeeeeearth... to be reeeeeeeeeased..."

"But I need you to help me," Pryce insisted, cutting off the creature's agonized longing. "Keep our meeting secret from anyone, or anything, you make contact with. Continue to guard this antechamber, but not from me. Can you do that?"

The two creatures nodded. "Good. Now, Geoffrey, show me where you found me."

The mongrelman lurched down the cavern, and the others followed.

CHAPTER NINE

Lay Down Your Blade

Pryce Covington wasn't particularly surprised when they returned to the very rock in the wall that had moved just prior to his being knocked unconscious behind Schreders's restaurant. It turned out that the flattened rock was a cleverly designed opening to a cave that ran from behind Schreders At Your Service to a patch of earth between the Lallor Wall and the Mark of the Question.

With a push from the other side, the mongrelman opened the partition, showing Pryce that the flat portal section of the rock was attached to the rest of the stone wall by two cunningly designed hinges, made to look like elongated pebbles. There was just enough room for Pryce to wriggle out.

Pryce quickly surveyed the small area behind the eating and drinking establishment, making sure it was empty and no kitchen staff member was watching before he hastily returned to the small tunnel opening. "I'll be back," he quietly assured Devolawk and the mongrelman. "Don't lose

hope. Now, quickly,
hide yourselves and let me speak to the Jackal."

The misshapen creatures moved back, and—eventually, reluctantly—Cunningham appeared at the portal and gazed out at the moonlight of Lallor. Cunningham reacted like an animal seeing the sky for the very first time. "Are—are you mad?" he gasped. "I cannot accept this! The longing!" There was wonder in his expression and tone, but also agony, since he now finally saw the comfort and serenity he had been missing in all his years of wandering and slaughter.

Pryce pushed his head halfway into the opening to block the torturing view. "Be strong, my dangerous aide," he contended. "And above all, don't unleash you magical gaze."

"It. . . would ... serve . . . you . . . right," the jackalwere grunted angrily, only just managing to avoid adding "sir."

"Listen, Cunningham, what I'm about to say is important to us both," Pryce said urgently. He waited until the jackalwere stopped hugging himself and averting his gaze. The half-man, half-beast blinked rapidly, then looked soulfully at Covington. "You may be a monster," Pryce continued evenly, "but what you are doing for those other two is not monstrous."

The jackalwere reacted with surprise and backed away. But he did not run. Instead, he stood in the shadows, halfway between the bowels of the earth and the clear Lallor sky, for quite some time before Covington heard his next quiet words.

"It is my curse to be given human consciousness, sir, a curse my children are blessed with not having. My animal nature needs to feed, and through it I only know the hunger of my body. But my human nature can feel pity and even empathy. Through it, I know the hunger of my mind... and perhaps my soul."

"I have been told that jackalweres have no soul," Pryce said softly.

"Who told you that?"

"Wizards," Pryce said diffidently.

Cunningham's sarcasm had the lightness of morning dew.

"Well, then," he said, "if the wizards say so, it must be true."

He was quiet for several moments more. Then: "In the misshapen ones, I see myself. But unlike me, one was not born this way. He was created by human monsters who could pervade this planet ... and that makes me feel rage."

Suddenly his face was back into the moonlight, no more than an inch from Covington's own. But it was not Cunningham's face. It was the face of the orange and black jackal, its eyes burning like the sun. It took everything Pryce was not to hurl himself back from those blazing, but purposefully nonhypnotic, eyes.

"I can do nothing for these creatures," growled the beast, "who are so wretched that even a monster such as I can care for them. But perhaps you can. And for that, and that alone, I will not kill you. I will not feast on your blood. I will not tear you limb from limb and feed you to my cherished children." He suddenly turned away. "Now I, too, must go. My nostrils begin to fill with the stench of Lallor wizards. And if I can smell them..."

The words were already diminishing in the distance, but there were three more to come, which Pryce heard distinctly on the wind: "Remember your promise!"

Pryce slowly closed the rock opening of the tunnel wall. He stood between the wall and the back door of the restaurant, his profile toward both. The throbbing in his head reminded him that, by rights, his attacker should have killed him. Why else would he take the trouble to so crudely strike Pryce on the head? Covington touched the healing lump on his head lightly, and the only real explanation occurred to him.

"By thunder," he whispered in the Lallor night. "I've got it!"

Pryce Covington was awestruck. Later he couldn't recall how long he had stood there thinking. He may have even mumbled. "But it can't be. Not that. No." But every piece he

mentally placed into the puzzle fit. The only problem was that there were still several pieces he didn't have yet.

Pryce moved quickly toward the narrow alley opening that led

to the street beyond. He now knew he had to move very quickly, or all might be lost. With a rustle of Darlington Blade's cloak, he was gone into the night.

Gheevy Wotfirr leaned contentedly back in his soft, comfortable chair, his hands warm around a steaming cup of aromatic Toussaintie brew. It had been sweetened by a few drops of Mar-riss insect secretions and was delightfully soothing after a long day of testing and storing liquor in the grotto.

Earlier Matthaunin Witterstaet had stopped by the halfling's burrow in the hill between Azzo's restaurant and the Ambersong residence for what had become their custom: a cup of Toussaintie and a friendly game of Eckhearts. The stooped, sagging old man followed the same routine each night before he retired to his cottage in the northeast shadow of the Lallor Wall.

Yes, Gheevy thought, all in all, a delightful evening of charming companionship and homespun stories.

Gheevy let his eyes roam contentedly about his burrow as he sipped the brew. The burrow's furniture was designed not for fashion but for comfort. Although Wotfirr's hairy bare feet now rested easily on a plush ottoman, his toes tingled with the expectation of eventually placing them on the plush multicolored carpets that covered the floor.

His eyes traveled over the rainbow of colors and shapes that made up his precious collection of liquids from all over Toril. They covered most of the wall space in the burrow and gave it the look of a shimmering glass museum. He had carefully designed the illumination so the soft light refracted comforting colors from the bottles across the entire space.

Yes, the halfling thought, looking down at his soft lounging

pants, brocaded vest, mock turtleneck sweater, and plush slippers, it was a wonderful life he had made for himself here in Lai-

lor. One in which comfort was everything and nothing could possibly go wrong...

There was an ominous knock on the door. Gheevy looked up in surprise, wondering who it could be at this time of night. Well, there were only two ways to find out. "Who is it?" he called, eliminating one of the ways.

There was no answer.

Just when he thought he might have imagined the knock, it was repeated, catching the halfling in the middle of turning away. Gheevy whirled around to face the door once more, nearly spilling his brew. "Yes?" he said shakily. There was still no reply.

Wotfirr considered not answering the summons, but his curiosity got the better of him. Besides, Matthaunin might have fallen and hurt himself and was too breathless to reply. The halfling screwed up his courage and crept forward. He gripped the door latch tightly and put his ear against the wood. "Hello?" he inquired.

The third knock made him jerk his head back, causing his hand to spasm and make the latch click up. Holding his breath, he opened the door an inch and carefully moved his head to the opening to peer out cautiously.

A blade shot between the door and the wall, narrowly missing his eye.

Before he could cry out, the door was forced open, a muscular hand was clamped across his lips, and Gheevy was catapulted back into his easy chair.

He landed with a thud, clawing and screeching. But a heavy weight on his legs kept him from escaping, and the hand remained firmly on his jaw, muffling his cries. To his horror, Gheevy heard the front door of his burrow click shut, cutting off any chance of escape.

The halfling's bulging eyes peered over the silencing hand

at the face of his attacker... only to see Pryce Covington sitting on

his legs, with the forefinger of his other hand against his lips "Shhhhhh," he whispered.

"You—" he started to exclaim, only to have Covington grimace, press his hand more tightly on Gheevy's lips, and jerk his head toward the door.

The halfling's eyes rolled in that direction in time to see Dearlyn Ambersong—dressed in a tight dark sweater, leggings, and boots beneath her Ambersong cloak—turn toward them, clutching her dangerous garden tool in her hands.

"Door secured," she whispered. "All clear."

The halfling finally realized that it had been her stick that shot at his face, keeping him from slamming the door. But as for the rest, he still couldn't make hide nor horsehair of it. He wrenched his eyes back toward Pryce, who leaned down until his face was no more than an inch from the halfling's.

"Take it easy, my friend," Covington whispered. "I couldn't afford to alert Matthaunin Witterstaet as to our presence. He might ask questions I don't want to even try answering at this juncture. Besides," he said with a shrug, "at this point we really can't trust anyone, so.... " He leaned back, cocked his head, and waited until the halfling nodded. Only then did Pryce remove his hand from Gheevy's mouth.

"So you thought you'd give me a heart attack?" Wotfirr sputtered.

Pryce stood up quickly and stepped over the halfling's previously pinioned legs. "I apologize profusely, my dear Gheevy, I truly do," Pryce said, "but time is of the essence."

Wotfirr watched in wonder as Pryce moved to the side of the mage's daughter. The sight of the two working together and the urgency of Covington's words effectively eliminated any anger the halfling still felt. It did not, however, eradicate the remainder of his fear. In fact, a new concern was beginning to grow in him, a concern that made him wonder if there

would be more murder to be found in the night. 'What are you doing here?' he asked urgently.

Dearlyn moved forward anxiously. "He's bringing me to my father!" she declared.

Gheevy looked up at Pryce in wonder. The man was standing beside a small half-moon-shaped window near the front door of the burrow, surveying the street outside to make sure Matthaunin—or anyone else—was not in the area. He flinched at the sound of Dearlyn's contention. "I only hope it's not too late," he added. He turned to face them both. "I was attacked earlier tonight," he informed the halfling.

"What?" Wotfirr bumbled in outrage.

"He wanted to come here directly," Dearlyn told Gheevy, looking at Pryce with concern. "But I insisted on treating his wound."

Pryce touched his head gingerly. "For which, once again, I thank you, but the injury is not as important as why I was attacked."

"And why was that?" Gheevy inquired.

"Whoever assaulted me wanted me to lead him, her, or it to Geerling's workshop."

The halfling sat up straight. The wonders inherent in that statement were almost too much for him to completely comprehend. To the halfling, the man standing before him was a magic-less vagabond who had discovered two corpses and had no idea where Geerling Ambersong's workshop was. But to Dearlyn, the mage's daughter, he was a great wizard and hero who had been given the Ambersong legacy instead of her, and a man who knew all there was to know about the workshop.

Keeping all those characters straight in the space of one burrow was going to take concentration indeed—concentration the addled halfling just couldn't quite muster at the moment.

"Geerling... you know... but who ... why... ?"

Pryce waved his hands in front of his face, seemingly batting

away all of Gheevy's sputterings. "We have no time for this," he said. "I think Teddington Fullmer set me up. I think he knocked me out, and I think that even now he's trying to make off with Geerling Ambersong's fortune!"

'Trying... Geerling Ambersong's...' Gheevy echoed. "Then what are you doing here?"

"We need your help, my friend."

"My help?" the halfling marveled. "But—"

"Please!" Pryce pleaded to the low ceiling. "No more questions! Just get on your best grotto-crawling clothes and follow me!"

* * * * *

"So you think the secret workshop is somewhere down here?" the halfling whispered.

The three made their cautious way down the tunnel behind Schreders's restaurant. The halfling held aloft a small illumination orb, which gave off just enough light to keep them from tripping or stumbling into anything. A standard torch would have filled the low, narrow cave with blinding, choking smoke within seconds. The rest of the navigation came from Pryce's memory.

Dearlyn held on to the hem of Darlington's cloak several feet behind them, using her horsehair-topped staff as a walking stick. She was so intent on making her way and so deep in her own thoughts that Gheevy and Pryce could talk quietly at length ... about very uncomfortable things.

"I'm certain of it," Pryce whispered back. "Where else could it be?"

"Is there another entrance on the other side of the workshop somewhere outside the caves?"

Pryce shook his head. "I doubt it. With all the anxious inquisitrixes and hopeful mages searching everywhere, I think the only way to protect it was to hide it here, literally under their very noses."

"Incredible," Gheevy whispered in wonder. Then his voice grew very quiet. "But with all due respect, why bring her

along?"

he said, nodding back toward Dearlyn. "It was either that or steal her cloak." "Steal her cloak?"

"Geerling Ambersong was a clever man. He wanted Darlington Blade and his daughter to work together as a team."

The halfling looked up at Pryce skeptically. "Are you sure?"

Pryce fingered Darlington Blade's cloak clasp, seemingly to relieve some of the tension now that Dearlyn was using it as a leash. "I'm sure of it."

"How can you be?" Gheevy wondered aloud.

Pryce leaned close to whisper his explanation. "To prevent any other magician from entering his workshop, I believe he secured it with a mechanical lock." He held up two fingers.

"With two keys."

"Two? But..." The halfling got no further because Pryce was moving the cloak clasp so that it reflected light from the orb directly into Gheevy's eyes.

"Are you all right, Blade?" Dearlyn inquired quietly. "I'm not pulling too much, am I?"

Pryce smiled sagely and nodded his head toward the mage's daughter. All the halfling could think of when he looked over at her was her cloak's clasp. What Pryce was suggesting came to Wotfirr in a flash.

"No problem, Miss Ambersong," Covington whispered back to her. "Watch your step." He turned back to gaze into Gheevy's perplexed, apprehensive face.

"Very well, then, but why me?" Gheevy wheezed. "Why am I here?"

Pryce looked pained, and his reply was strained. "Come, come, Gheevy. Think! The mind behind all this is not that of a novice or apprentice. It must be a wizard of high rank."

The truth of that statement dawned in the halfling, and suddenly his expression was infused with fear. What Pryce said next only made it worse.

"Everyone who worked with Geerling is dead. Maybe that's

why he refused to teach his daughter ... because he knew that everyone who learned from him would be placed in grave danger."

"But why?" Gheevy moaned quietly.

"I'm not sure. Maybe he took the teachings of Sante too seriously and started dabbling in forbidden arts. Only then, by the time he discovered that he had unleashed forces he couldn't control, he was in too deep. Then all he could do was destroy himself or destroy others to cover his tracks. Who knows? All I do know is that I have to gain entrance to his workshop."

"Blade, you must tell Dearlyn about all this."

Pryce shook his head, happy that the gloom was too thick for her to see his tormented expression. "I can't predict her reaction. The odds are too long."

"Then tell Inquisitrix Lymwich."

"And risk her finding out who I am? No, thank you. She would have me enfeebled, or worse, disintegrated, out of pure spite."

"Then tell some inquisitrix!" Gheevy pleaded passionately.

"We can't face whoever—or whatever—is in that workshop alone!"

Even though she couldn't make out their words, Dearlyn couldn't mistake the anxious tone of their voices any longer.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "What are you two talking about?"

Pryce stopped suddenly, and she nearly bumped into him. He took no pleasure in her proximity, however. "We're getting close, Miss Ambersong," he told her, refusing to acknowledge that he could also be talking about their emotional relationship as well. "And I must have your promise that, no matter what happens, you will put your faith in me."

Her eyes seemed like bottomless pools in the light of the orb. "What... what is it you're not telling me?" she whispered.

Pryce's heart went out to her in her vulnerability and then sank at the depths of his deception. 'There's ... there's more to

this than your father's disappearance. I implore you to be ready for anything. There's..."

But before he could go on, the huge misshapen head of a mongrelman moved into the illumination of the orb.

The halfling let out a shriek, tossed the orb into the air, then leapt behind the woman to cower behind her floor-length cloak. Dearnyn dropped her staff and began a spell. Pryce nimbly caught both the illumination orb and her staff as they fell, then used the pole to give her gesturing hands a sharp slap, disrupting her spell.

She looked up at him in surprise and numbly took back the staff he offered. She looked from it to him to the mongrelman, dumbfounded, then grasped her gardening implement tightly and assumed a defensive position, the tip pointing directly at the monster.

Pryce simply shook his head, daintily gripped the staff in two fingers, and raised it so he could step between Dearnyn and the mongrelman.

"It's all right," he assured the stunned woman. "He's with me."

Dearnyn stared at Pryce in amazement; then her expression changed to awe. Then they both realized that Gheevy was still cowering behind her, muttering.

Pryce quickly knelt down and gripped the halfling's elbow with his free hand.

A mongrelman, beneath our city!" Gheevy was gasping. "He'll bring others of his kind. They'll eat me! Raiders are sure to follow! We must—"

Pryce shook him firmly. "We must stop talking about things we know nothing about," he said pointedly.

The halfling blinked, then looked directly at Covington, but the terror didn't leave his face. "But they—they speak a debased language. They can communicate with other

beasts!"

"I know," Pryce said intently. "Are you familiar with this so-called debased language?"

That drew Gheevy up short. "Well, no..."

"Then stop talking your own debased language for a moment, would you? Listen to me, Gheevy. They saved me. They won't hurt you!"

The halfling looked up at Pryce hopefully... until one word Covington had said echoed in Wotfirr's mind." They'?"

He peered out from behind Dearlyn's legs. There, with his halfling vision, he saw in the gloom the hulking mongrelman... and behind it, a creature that was bird, part vole, and part human cadaver. To complete the picture, the tattered traveler who had rendered him unconscious on the road loomed behind them.

He jerked back to face Pryce, shaking uncontrollably. "All I want is the comfort of home!" he cried. "Is that so much to ask?"

"Wotfirr!" Pryce snapped, hitting him on the arm. "And all I want is a cushy job for life!"

The halfling grabbed his arm in pain and looked up at Covington, his eyes narrowing. "Ouch," he said with resentment, rubbing his upper arm.

Pryce sighed. "Gheevy, I've discovered that in Lallor you can't always get what you want. Sometimes you have to fight for it."

"Okay, okay," the halfling complained, still massaging his bruised limb. "Why did you hit me so hard?"

"Sorry," Pryce apologized, handing him the illumination orb.

"Here, you'll need this." He started to turn around, but Gheevy urgently gripped his cloak. Pryce turned back with concern.

Wotfirr smiled wanly. "We halflings like our creature comforts and pride ourselves on our honesty," he said quietly, apology evident in his tone. "But we are esteemed for our honor even more."

Pryce put his hand on his friend's shoulder and smiled. "And deservedly so," he replied. "Now take care of that illumination orb, would you?"

Gheevy purposefully thrust the orb out before him. It illuminated the mongrelman, his huge, rag-covered body shielding the cowering form of the broken one behind him.

"It's all right, Geoffrey," Pryce said reassuringly. "I didn't have time to tell them about you."

The mongrelman gibbered and nodded, saliva coursing down his distended, scaly jaw.

Pryce nodded back, then stepped over to take Dearlyn's arm. He almost did a double take when he saw the look of admiration on the woman's face. "You... befriended these creatures?" she asked.

Pryce was pleased at her reaction and turned to smile at his irregular trio of assistants. "It is a distinct privilege for me to introduce you to Geoffrey...." The mongrelman lowered his head sadly, his eyes closing. "Devolawk..." The broken one raised his beak and waved with what served as its arms. "And, of course, Cunningham." The jackalwere, in complete human form, bowed graciously. "Of the three, trust the latter the least." Cunningham snapped back up, a look of exaggerated hurt on his face.

"Blade?" Gheevy said tightly, still holding the orb stiffly out in front of him. "Do we have time for this?"

"I think so," Pryce replied. "You see, they are my guards. Fullmer, or anyone else, I imagine, couldn't get close to the workshop with them on duty."

"They protected my father?" Dearlyn asked hopefully.

Pryce felt a pang of guilt. "I don't truthfully know, Miss Ambersong. We will have to see. But what I can tell you," he said, and he felt relief to finally get some of the truth off his chest, "is that Cunningham the jackalwere was lured here by the broken one, who is a prime example of magic gone wrong. Once here, the jackalwere was asked in turn by a magical communication to lure a mongrelman who was well

versed in concealment."

Dearlyn looked at the trio in confusion. "But why? To conceal what?"

"Your father's workshop, I'm afraid."

She looked at Pryce, her eyes accusatory. "Are you saying my father did this?"

"I don't know," Pryce said quickly.

"You don't know!" she flared. "If not you, who?"

"Dearlyn!" he interrupted sharply. "This isn't easy for any of us, least of all them." He pointed purposefully at the cursed trio. "We have to get into the workshop," he stressed, "and then maybe we'll discover the truth."

The proud woman stiffened. "Are you telling me you cannot gain entrance by yourself?"

"Yes," he admitted without shame. "That's exactly what I'm telling you. Now you tell me. Is it possible that your father would simply give me the keys to his workshop ... or give a key to us both... that can only be used if we work together?"

Her rising anger suddenly stilled. The realization of her father's true nature—the one she always knew was there and desperately wanted to believe in—overwhelmed her ire and started to bring tears to her eyes.

Pryce turned away from her and gave the mongrelman a simple instruction.

"Lead us to the workshop."

Soon the six of them stood before the concealing wall. To Gheevy and Dearlyn's eyes, it looked like any other section of the cave, but the others knew of the hidden tube through the rock.

Pryce turned to the misshapen ones. "We're going to open the compartment now," he told them. "Hide yourselves. If anything bad happens, I wish you a peaceful, long life."

Dearlyn and Gheevy looked at each other with concern and a little confusion. The mongrelman babbled incoherently, and the broken one pushed his head over the other's shoulder. "Weeeee willll protect you, Blade!" he whistled and

burbled. "Weeeee don't wish... to loooooose you."

"You cannot—you must not—try to protect me," Pryce told them with honest appreciation. His Covington side felt a pang of missed opportunity, but his Blade side knew it had to be this way. Besides, any revelation of his Covington nature would put his absolutely vital impersonation at risk. He might gain protection for a few moments, but if any of them even suspected that he wasn't who they said he was, he would be dissected almost immediately. "This road I must walk alone, with only the Ambersong daughter and the primary mage's friend by my side. Our road together—wherever it leads—must take a different route."

The mongrelman made crying sounds and shook, but eventually he shambled away, taking the crestfallen broken one with him. Only Cunningham remained. Pryce stared bravely at him until he realized the jackalwere's expression was not one of respect or admiration, but of hope and hunger.

"Cunningham..." he said warningly.

The jackalwere looked suddenly wounded. "Sir, I assure you ... how could you think... ?"

"Cunningham!" Pryce snapped. Then he leaned in and spoke carefully. "No... after... assault... snacks. You hear me?"

"Quite distinctly, sir." He drew himself up, and Pryce could see that he was essentially dusting off his pride. "Shall I go see to it that the others are safe and well hidden?"

"You shall," Pryce commanded flatly.

"Very good, sir." He leaned to one side and called to the others. "Best of luck, diminutive sir. You too, milady. Enjoy the opening!"

"Get out of here!" But by the time the last word was out of Pryce's mouth, the jackalwere had disappeared into the darkness.

Only then did Gheevy lower the illumination orb from in front of his face. "So," he said with relief. "Where is it?"

"There," said Pryce, motioning with his head toward the wall.

He swung his cloak off and started examining how the clasp was attached. "I'll need the clasp from your cloak as well, Dearlyn."

She looked puzzled and began fingering the circular clasp at her neck.

"The clasps serve as individual keys to the Ambersong lodging. I think they are also the keys to the workshop as well, but only if they are used in combination." He looked at her, his expression revealing no chagrin or regret. "When your father left you, he left me as well. I don't know where he is, but I believe that he wanted us to cooperate." At that moment, as if on cue, the clasp popped off into his hand.

"Yes," Dearlyn said quietly, nodding. "That makes sense. It sounds like something Father would do." Then she started to pull off her cloak. Soon Pryce held both clasps in his hand.

"I saw a grating of some sort a couple of feet down the entry tube," Pryce explained. "It had specific markings on it, like a rune or a code of some sort." He turned the clasps this way and that in his palm. "Looking directly at it, it seemed to be four esoterically designed letters, one on top of the other: U, V, O, and W."

"Use Virtue Open Wall?" Dearlyn said immediately. Both men stared at her. Then they looked at the wall in anticipation. Nothing happened.

"We could play that game all day," Gheevy commented. "Useless Violence Obscures Wonder. Ultimate Victory Or Woe. Untold Victims Obviously Worried—"

Pryce interrupted, making it clear that this game was at an end. "I think it's some kind of a special lock that needs an aligning key." He took Dearlyn's clasp, which had her initials outlined in flower petals, and turned it sideways to the left. The A was now on top, and when it was tipped slightly, an extra flower petal seemed to lengthen the Crosshatch of the A. The D looked like a J7 with a line across the top.

"You-vee," Gheevy formed the sound. "But what about the W?"

"I'll give you the 'ow' in a second if you don't keep quiet," Pryce warned, the tension beginning to make him giddy. He held

up Darlington Blade's clasp, turned it sideways and to the left, then all the way around. The D and B created from the thorns became a half oval and a rounded W. "Put them both together—" which he did—"and they spell—" "You-vow," Gheevy said admiringly.

Dearlyn nodded proudly. "Of course my father would want us to work together. It's just like him!"

Pryce looked at her with concern before continuing. "Now to put my theory to the test." He stepped toward the wall, then stopped and turned back. "No one with a thinner arm, I suppose, would be interested?... No, I had better do this myself."

He put the two clasps side by side in his hand, surprised by how naturally they seemed to fit together. The flower petals and the thorns seemed to link together in position, maintaining the oddly designed U-V-O-W'm place. With his other hand, Pryce gripped the lip of the hole he knew was there and started to pull himself up. "Gheevy," he grunted. "I need a solid surface to stand on to position the clasps just right."

The halfling rolled his eyes. It had been an eventful night already, and he was weary... not to mention irritable. "And I suppose you want my back as that solid surface?"

Dearlyn looked down at him with reproach. "Don't be petty," she admonished. "If you won't do it, I will!" She was already on one knee when the halfling stopped her.

"All right, all right. I'll do it. Just wait a moment, would you?"

Gheevy got down on all fours and placed his side against the rock wall. "Very well, Blade. Go ahead."

Pryce grabbed the upper rock protrusion, then stepped on Wotfirr's back. "All right?" he inquired, to which the halfling grunted in the affirmative. Covington found himself gritting his teeth. If he was wrong, there was no predicting what

might happen. At the very least, he could probably say good-bye to his arm. So, under his breath, he did. Then he cautiously put that selfsame arm down the tube, holding the clasps out before him.

Pryce grimaced, then winked as sweat rolled into his eyes. Soon his arm was completely inside the rock, his muscles straining. "Anything?" Gheevy asked.

"Not... yet," Pryce grunted, but then the top of the clasps touched the grating and were sucked from Covington's fingers with an audible clanking sound.

Pryce leapt down from the wall as if the tube had ejected his arm. As he hit the opposite wall, they all heard a hum, then a grinding of gears.

Pryce rose to his feet, holding on to the opposite wall for support. They all watched, amazed, as a section of the cave wall swung out like a vault door.

The edge of the swinging partition just flicked the end of Pryce's nose, but it swept the kneeling halfling along like a broom sweeping up a particularly annoying dust ball. "Darling-ton!" Gheevy cried in fear. Pryce was grateful that, even in what could have been his last seconds on Toril, the halfling hadn't revealed his true identity.

Just as it seemed that Wotfirr would be crushed against the rock wall, the partition ground to a stop.

The halfling rolled one way and the illumination orb he had been holding rolled another. Dearnyn ran forward to gather Gheevy up in her arms, while Pryce nimbly caught the orb and slipped it into his pocket. Then his eyes widened and he caught his breath. He remained stock still, standing before the opening, taking in the room that was revealed beyond.

Within moments, all three stopped moving, talking, or even breathing as they got their first look at the secret workshop of Geerling Ambersong.

It was a room dug out of the very earth beyond the cave wall, a section of which served as the door. All the furniture was made of stone, the chairs made comfortable with thick,

comfortable-looking, ornately decorated pillows. There were stone tables and stone shelves, some attached to the wall and supported by stone

legs and braces, while others seemed to float of their own accord. There was a modicum of solid and liquid refreshment—even some barrels from Schreders—but mostly every surface was covered with spellbooks and magical items. It was what Dearlyn Ambersong had dreamt of all her life. She looked as if she were about to faint.

Large roughly bound volumes featured the engraved A of the Ambersong family on their covers. They were all crammed with different-colored parchment, detailing spells and conjuring not yet imagined. There were models of an Ambersong skyship, hovering in the air near the stone ceiling like heavenly stars. There was even a girdle of priestly might, glowing with unknown power, standing of its own accord on a rock shelf.

There were beakers, bottles and tubes of every color, shape, size, and consistency—some made of glass, some of gems, some of wood, and some of steel. Inside were powders, liquids, beads, and flakes of every imaginable magical necessity. It was all so amazing and impressive that it took several seconds before the three explorers noticed something incongruous on the floor.

Lying on its face, in the middle of the room, was a motionless human body.

CHAPTER TEN

Human Life Is Pryceless

Six eyes settled on the body at the same time. Two mouths below four of the eyes spoke not a word, but Dearlyn broke the stony silence.

"Father?"

No answer.

When the wall had opened, illumination spells had been activated, and a comforting glow bathed everything, including the unmoving figure, in soft light. The figure on

the floor was swathed in thick, rich crimson and jade clothing, complete with a full cape, high boots, and a fur-lined cowl. The three onlookers hesitated to enter the workshop for individual reasons. Pryce, for one, couldn't help wondering what magical defenses might lie beyond the open partition.

Then, as if on cue, the cloak clasps popped out of the grate in the wall. Gheevy let out a little cry of surprise as they heard the clasps disconnect and start to roll the rest of the way through the tube. Without thinking, Pryce stepped forward to catch them as

they slipped out of a little round hole in the other side of the open partition.

Dearlyn looked at Pryce anxiously. By way of answering, Pryce tossed one clasp over to her and quickly started to reattach Blade's clasp to his cloak. Dearlyn caught hers in one hand. Gheevy just stood there, nonplussed.

Pryce looked at Gheevy. Gheevy looked at Dearlyn. They all looked back at the body. Then they all took their first tentative steps toward the prone form together.

Only when they were all huddled around the form was there another tentative pause. The woman and the halfling looked directly at Covington—the former with hope and the latter with dread.

Pryce felt compelled to say something, but his brain warned him to keep quiet. There was no way anything he said would have a positive effect... not until he knew whose body this was. Carefully Pryce placed his hand beneath the figure's shoulder and, with a certainty of purpose, pulled.

To his embarrassment, Pryce could hardly move the figure. If this was Dearlyn's father, he had been eating and drinking way too much. Pryce braced himself by laying his other hand flat on the floor then used all his strength to roll the body over.

The three stared down into the face of Teddington Fullmer.

Dearlyn exhaled audibly in relief, then seemed ashamed.

Gheevy made a little grunting sound of surprise, then looked away. Only Pryce continued to stare directly at the visage in confusion. It wasn't that he didn't feel relief. On the contrary. In a distant, annoying way, he was glad that the blackmailing blackguard was no longer around to make his life miserable. He would have preferred that he had simply moved miles away of his own accord, but there it was.

'Teddington Fullmer," he said aloud slowly. 'Teddington Fullmer?"

The halfling looked at the woman, then turned to the seemingly

mesmerized Pryce. "What is it, Blade?" Gheevy said with concern.

Pryce looked wonderingly at Wotfirr. "I was attacked earlier tonight," he said thoughtfully. "I thought it was by him." He pointed at Fullmer.

Dearlyn had leaned in to listen to the hushed conversation.

"It still could have been," she reminded him.

Gheevy looked worriedly at Pryce, but Covington already knew that he couldn't say everything he was thinking in front of Dearlyn. Silently he pursued the evasive mental clue that was even now trying to form in his brain. "Well, I suppose he could have had accomplices."

"Or maybe he followed you," Dearlyn suggested. "And someone followed him."

The body groaned.

They all leapt back.

"I thought he was dead," Gheevy said in alarm as he cowered on all fours.

Pryce was also on his hands and knees. "I thought so, too," he said truthfully. He looked down at Fullmer carefully, but the body hadn't moved. "No discernible marks that I can see. No signs of violence..."

'There's no look of fear or anger on his face," Dearlyn pointed out. It was true. Fullmer looked positively placid.

The halfling and the impostor stared directly at each other,

silently acknowledging that Teddington Fullmer's face looked as composed as Darlington Blade's dead countenance had.

Dearlyn interrupted their moment of realization. "All you can see is his face and hands. What about the rest of him?"

It was true. Pryce had been struck on the head. Maybe Fullmer had been as well, and the thick cowl had soaked up all the blood. "Good point," Covington acknowledged. "We had better do a thorough examination."

"Use your magic," she suggested. Gheevy looked up in a near panic.

"Don't be absurd!" Pryce flared, restraining his own dismay. "Whoever did this—he struggled to find a way out of the sentence, then rushed to finish it with triumphant relief—is a master magician! He ... or she," he stressed, getting into the spirit of his anti-casual-use-of-magic diatribe, "would be sure to use obscuring spells to make me believe whatever he or she wants me to believe." He grumbled, walking on his knees so he could get closer to Fullmer's head. "Soon you'll be using magic for the simplest of things, and then where will we be?"

"All right, all right," Dearlyn muttered back, walking on her own knees toward Fullmer's head from the opposite direction. "It was only a suggestion." She certainly wasn't going to use her own illicit teachings... not with Gheevy there as a possible witness against her.

The three huddled around Fullmer's head. Pryce wiggled his fingers in preparation. He moved them like spider legs over Fullmer's cranium, preparing to pull back the cowl. "We'll look for any contusions and I'll check for a pulse," he told them.

Nobody argued with him, and they found themselves holding their breath. Pryce carefully gripped the fur cowl and started to pull the material back. As it receded, they all leaned closer until they were no more than six inches from Fullmer's face.

That's when the trader's eyes popped open and he sprang upward with an ear-shattering scream.

The reaction couldn't have been any more severe had someone thrown a basketful of poisonous snakes into the room. Pryce literally did a backward somersault in midair, slapping his hands on the floor and springing—feet first, belly down—over a floating stone tabletop. Gheevy leapt from all fours to the side, slamming into a pillow-cushioned stone chair. And Dearlyn cried out, using her staff as a pole vault to push herself up onto her

feet, then slid back until she hit the side wall.

They gripped whatever they were close to—a table, a chair, and a wall—to keep from fleeing as Fullmer continued to screech, shriek, groan, and gurgle, his feet slapping the floor and his arms swinging wildly. His cowl fell back, and they all could clearly see the deep, wide, awful gash on the side of his head.

Sante says the side means death! Pryce remembered with a sinking sensation.

All three began to realize that something beyond the obvious was terribly wrong. On his feet now, Fullmer wasn't waking up, nor was he fighting an imaginary assailant. He was acting like a marionette controlled by an amateur puppeteer. He was like a newborn hippogriff trying to control its limbs and wings.

"What's the matter with him?" Gheevy called, cowering in the chair.

"I don't know," Pryce said, studying Fullmer carefully. 'Teddington!' he called. 'Teddington! It's me, Pry—, uh, Darlington Blade.' He glanced nervously at Dearlyn, but she only had eyes for the lurching trader. "I'm over here, Teddington... Darlington Blade, remember?"

The staggering man showed no specific reaction. Instead, he just kept jerking and jabbering.

"A haunt!" Dearlyn suddenly cried.

"A what?" Pryce couldn't prevent himself from asking.

"A haunt," she repeated more urgently. She looked directly at Pryce. "Don't you feel its presence?"

He looked away from her to stare with calculated determination at Fullmer ... or whoever he now was. "Of course," he snapped with authority, as if grading her. "Good call."

"A haunt?" Gheevy wailed. "What's that?"

"The restless spirit of a person who died leaving some vital task unfinished!" Dearlyn said in a rush.

"So Fullmer still has to be alive," Pryce realized, but barely, by the look of his wound.

"Yes," Dearlyn replied breathlessly. "A haunt can't take over a body of the dead."

"Fullmer!" Pryce cried, knowing they didn't have much time.

"What is it? Who is it?"

"The possession must be incomplete," Dearlyn warned. "It's struggling for control of his body!"

"What then? What then?" Gheevy moaned, practically crawling into the chair's pillow.

"It will use the body to complete its task and to gain final release from this world," she shouted over Fullmer's increasing commotion.

Fullmer suddenly took an awkward step toward the chair. Gheevy let out a squawk, and Pryce used the floating tabletop as a bar to swing himself over to where the cowering halfling sat. Covington stood in front of the chair, protecting arms wide, just as Fullmer bent, veered, and finally rose to his full height—to face the woman.

"D-D-D-Dearlyn," it managed to mumble through rubbery lips, "my... my... my... d-d-daughter..."

Pryce leaned back. Gheevy leaned forward. The woman's jaw dropped open.

"F-F-Father?"

"Dearlyn, my child!" the haunt howled, then stumbled back, its arms flailing, until it hit the far wall of the workshop. Glass shattered, dust flew out in a multicolored cloud, and

parchment scattered like autumn leaves in a stiff breeze.

"Father!" she cried, leaping toward him. Pryce intercepted her, wrapping his arms around her waist and swinging her back just in time to prevent the clutching fingers of the haunt from closing on her hair.

"Wait!" Pryce cried, struggling to hold on to her fighting form.

"He's my father, curse you!" she said, pummeling him on the head and shoulders. She was kind enough to keep her palms open, however.

"Ow! He says he's your father, blast it!" Pryce insisted. "Are you going to—ouch!—run into the arms of everything that calls you 'daughter'?"

She took careful aim and hit him again. "Darlington, he's a haunt! Not a groaning spirit, not a specter, not a ghost—a haunt! What sort of mage are you, anyway?"

He let her go instantly, stung by his own guilt. She turned, but by the time she returned her gaze to Fullmer, her expression wasn't so certain. "Father?" she called with a quaking voice, suddenly keeping her distance. "Father? Is that you?"

The voice that answered was a far-off lament. "Dearlynnnnnn____"

"Are you dead, Father?" The sudden realization made her start. She began to cry. "Did someone kill you?"

Fullmer's face was turned away, his arms jerking at his side, his fingers shaking like willow branches in the wind.

"Yessssss ..." came the answer.

"Who, Father, who?" Dearlyn asked urgently through her tears. "Who killed you?"

Pryce was beside her now, leaning toward the haunt. So when it suddenly spun around, its arm stiffly out, its accusing finger was pointing almost directly in Pryce's face.

"Darlington Blade..." it cried.

Pryce was fast, but Dearlyn's staff was almost faster. He spun

his head toward her, but his vision filled with her look of hatred and revenge before it was replaced by spinning red horsehair and sharpened gardening tools.

Pryce dived backward, just missing the side of the stone seat where Gheevy sat. He executed a quick backflip, but Dearlyn was there, stomping on the hem of his cloak. He wrenched his head back, popping the clasp. The cloak snapped off, and he landed on his knees before her, his arms outstretched.

"I'm not Darlington Bladel!" he screamed just as the pole touched his sternum.

The tip of the staff froze a centimeter into his chest. "What did you say?"

"I'm not Darlington Blade!" he repeated, his hands wide, his knees at the edge of the accursed cloak, which she ground under her foot. "Kill me if you must—I won't blame you—but I swear on the memory of my own father, I am not Darlington Blade!"

That stopped her for a moment, but a moment only. Then her expression changed back into one of pure loathing, and her fingers tightened on her staff. "Why, you—"

"No, mistress!" Gheevy cried, sliding in front of Pryce, his own hands clasped in supplication. "He didn't mean it. I swear, it was an accident!"

"Out of my way, halfling!"

"Miss Ambersong," Wotfirr pleaded, "he is a poor specimen, to be sure, but to his credit, he never told anyone he was Darlington Blade. They simply assumed it!"

"I just borrowed the cloak. I didn't know whose it was—"

"And by the time he found out, it was too late!"

The two babbled quicker and quicker in front of the enraged woman, but they would never know what she would have done, because at that moment the man who had been Teddington Fullmer loomed up behind her.

Gheevy screamed as the haunt slammed down across her shoulders. Dearlyn was dragged down by its weight. They

both landed on top of Pryce Covington as Wotfirr scampered away in horror.

Dearlyn struggled to get out from under the flailing body of Teddington Fullmer as Pryce struggled to get out from under them both. But then the haunt's rubbery lips finally spoke directly into the woman's ear.

"... didn't kill me!" the working mouth frothed as Fullmer's mind had to force each word out. "Darlington Blade did not kill me!"

Gheevy cowered in the corner as the haunt continued to hiss directly into Dearlyn's ear. "It wasn't Darlington Blade. It was the one behind him... behind him!"

Then they all heard it—a death rattle, starting high in his throat and dropping into his esophagus. Teddington Fullmer had run out of life. Geerling Ambersong had run out of time.

All they heard now was Dearlyn's angry sobbing as she kicked and punched her way out from beneath the dead weight of the man who had been Pryce's betrayer and the last evidence of her father. Pryce just lay there, exhausted, his arms out, not making a single move to help her.

Finally she clawed her way free to sit beside the corpse, sweating and panting, her purple face swollen with shock, grief, wrath, and confusion. "What," she choked, "was that?"

Pryce raised his head to stare at the finally dead figure with wonder and a strange, sickening feeling of recognition. "A dying clue," he whispered blankly.

He only reacted when Dearlyn suddenly turned to yell directly at him. "You... you... nothing! You are nothing! You know nothing! Nothing!" Then she collapsed on the floor, her face in her hands, sobbing.

All Pryce could do was stare at her, his face twisted with regret and helplessness. Finally the full realization of his responsibility lay across his shoulders with all the weight of the Inquistrix Castle. "I know what I have to do," he finally said, to himself more than anyone. Dearlyn looked up, but tearfully choked back her response. Instead, she hung her

head and whimpered in disgust and loss.

Gheevy Wotfirr ran forward, struggling to help Pryce out from beneath the corpse of Teddington Fullmer. "Hush, my friend," the halfling advised. "You are in shock."

But Pryce Covington was too distracted even to recognize the symptoms. As if in a trance, he let the halfling help him up. "A locked room mystery," he whispered, leaning over to Wotfirr so

Dearlyn wouldn't hear. "And a dying clue. It's a triple mystery, with all the trappings of legend. Gheevy!" he gasped in amazement, "after all this time pussyfooting around behind the scenes, here's a murder we can ooenly solve!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blades to Ploughshares

With a thump, Pryce Covington closed the last book of philosophy written by Sante, the renowned priest, healer, and, from what he could read, even judge. A cloud of dust blown from the aged pages settled down on every side of the volume, as well as on Pryce's crossed legs. He was tired but fascinated, saddened but informed, remorseful yet satisfied. With the help of these volumes of ancient instruction, brilliantly translated from archaic languages by Geerling Ambersong himself, Covington had successfully taken hold of the tiger's tail.

Now all he had to do was ride the beast without being eaten alive.

Pryce sat alone in the secret workshop, creating new strategies. For some reason, his original motto repeatedly came back to mind, only this time in a slightly amended form: "Everything to lose; nowhere to run. I will do what must be done."

The halfling grotto manager stuck his head between the stone door and the stationary cave wall. "Blade?" he inquired quietly.

"Yes, Gheevy?"

"Dearlyn is resting back at the Ambersong residence." Pryce sighed. "Good. I'm glad. I hope she'll be able to get some sleep."

"I told her you wished to talk to her later," the halfling reported, "if she's willing to listen."

"Thank you. Did she answer you?"

The halfling pursed his lips and looked down. "No."

Pryce Covington shook his head ruefully. "That's all right, my friend. I don't blame her, really. Is everything else ready?"

The halfling looked up, his expression brightening. "Yes, sir. Everything is ready out here."

"Excellent. Thank you." Pryce carefully placed the last book of the learned priest back on the hovering stone slab next to him, then grabbed the lip of the table and started to pull himself up. He groaned, his elbow and knee joints popping audibly.

The halfling shook his head in bemusement. He had tried to counsel Covington to use this time for rest, but his sage advice had fallen on deaf ears. "You really should get some sleep, you know," he said for the sixth time.

Pryce stretched his arms as high as they could go over his head, letting out an expansive grunt. Then he relaxed. "Teddington Fullmer is sleeping," he said lightly. "Geerling Ambersong is sleeping. Even Gamor Turkal is sleeping." He walked to the door and started to cross in front of the halfling. "There'll be plenty of time for sleep later," he concluded quietly as he passed.

It was an entirely new world outside the no-longer-secret workshop. The caverns, from the hatchlike entryway behind Schreders At Your Service to the workshop door, had been illuminated by a string of floating light orbs. Lallor militia units in specially designed uniforms stood beside every glowing bulb, hands resting on the hilts of short swords specially designed for all their indoor hacking needs.

Inquisitrixes, in their own uniforms of black and gold, moved about, carefully examining every inch of the caverns. They

sometimes found evidence of magic, over which they tossed crystals or powders and muttered divining spells with accompanying gestures. If there were any other secrets hidden in these caves, these illusion scholars would find them.

Directly in front of Covington lay a naked Teddington Fullmer, floating above the cave floor on a magically enhanced morgue slab. Examining his feet was, surprisingly, Matthaunin Witter-staet, wearing his customary gatekeeper robe. Examining Fullmer's head was Berridge Lymwich, dressed in her full inquisitrix regalia. Pryce approached the latter first.

"I imagine Dearlyn and Gheevy have told you everything they know by now," he said. "Anything I can add?"

"I don't know," she said in her sandy voice without taking her eyes off Fullmer's head wound. "Is there?" She seemed to be angry that he had given her something to do other than covet his status.

Pryce shrugged, refusing to be baited. "Possibly not... but I can tell you what you're thinking." She finally looked at him — first with surprise, then with disbelief, and finally with defiance. She said nothing, but Pryce took her behavior as permission. "You're thinking someone at Schreders's place did this." Mentally he scored himself a point, not because she reacted in surprise, but because she didn't. Instead, Lymwich folded her arms and let her eyelids fall to half mast.

"What makes you think that?"

Pryce shrugged, frowning. "It only makes sense. The entrance was right behind the tavern's back door; Azzo was in a position to know almost everything that went on in Lallor; and, besides, who but a non-mage would kill anyone as crudely as this?"

Lymwich kept her arms crossed and exhaled through her nose, like a bull about to charge. Pryce took it as a sign of grudging acceptance. He glanced around at her sister inquisitrixes. "Any luck finding Geerling's haunt?"

Lymwich looked at the other inquisitrixes' progress in the cavern with a certain frustration. "Not a thing," she admitted reluctantly. "Curse it, a haunt must remain within sixty yards of where its body lies! But no matter how we track it—up, down, right, left—nothing! If either the daughter or the halfling had come to me with this story minus your corroboration, I never would have believed it."

"Ah, the joys of reputation," Pryce said. He looked at her with calm self-assurance. "Have you done as I requested?"

She seemed ready to argue, but quickly controlled herself. "What you had your halfling ... associate ... request for you," she corrected him reprovngly. "But," she conceded, "your idea was an expedient one. It met with the approval of my superiors."

Pryce resisted the temptation to rub salt into her wounded ego, so he kept his expression placid and his tongue still. He simply nodded and stepped over to the other side of the slab. He tried to attract the gatekeeper's attention, but the old fellow was too intent on the body. "You're a man of many talents," Pryce finally said idly.

"Hmmmmmm?" the gatekeeper said without looking up.

"Gate guard, immigration officer, and now magical examiner."

"Cleric as well," Lymwich elaborated. "Matthaunin is one of our little community's most respected members."

"Outside of your own master, of course," Witterstaet hastily added.

"Really?" Pryce retorted.

"Geerling Ambersong basically gave Witterstaet his choice of responsibilities in our exclusive retreat," Lymwich continued, walking the length of the morgue slab and back again, "and he chose his place at the gate."

"Fresh air," Witterstaet explained, looking at the ceiling of the cavern, "meeting new people, constant intellectual stimulation..."

"But you also double, or should I say triple, as an examiner?"

Pryce marveled.

"Matthaunin is also one of the most respected seers of magical presence in the nation," Lymwich said sourly, apparently not reserving her infinite pool of envy to Blade alone.

"Really?" Pryce drawled again, raising one eyebrow practically up into his hairline.

"It has been said, sir," Witterstaet answered modestly, "but, of course, I wouldn't dare test my paltry skills against your own, sir."

"Wouldn't you, now?" Pryce echoed, looking askance at Lymwich, who studiously avoided his gaze. Even so, Pryce quickly redirected their attention, just in case anyone considered pressing the point. "And have you uncovered anything around the body of Teddington Fullmer?"

Once that subject was again broached, Witterstaet seemed to forget all about Blade's fame. "Well, there was a very indistinct shadow, or afterimage—an echo, if you will—of the haunt's previous presence that even I was hard pressed to perceive." He turned toward Pryce for a moment. "But that is just a testament to the skill and power of your master." He turned back to Fullmer's cadaver. "Other than that, there isn't a single iota of magic anywhere in, around, or on the body. Whatever happened to him prior to the haunt's possession, it was done by a person alien to any form of magic."

Before Pryce could consider the ramifications of that statement, the people he had asked to be summoned arrived. Pryce stepped back as burly, bearded tavern owner Azzoparde Schred-ers, blonde and beautiful serving wench Sheyrhen Karkober, and gaunt mine owner Asche Hartov—in the company of several in-quisitrixes and militiamen—made their way down the brightly lit cavern to the section of wall that hid the workshop.

"Cost, what is the meaning of this?" the gaunt mine owner demanded.

"You had to pay these people?" the serving wench asked Hartov incredulously.

Pryce rolled his eyes, then put his hands on his waist and leaned toward the three arrivals. "I told you before, Asche, Cost Privington is a pseudonym... a false identity. My real name is... Darlington Blade." Pryce nodded to himself. He was getting the pause between "is" and "Darlington" down to mere seconds. Maybe if he said it often enough, he'd actually come to believe it

"Harrumph," wheezed Hartov, bending his slight frame. "False identity indeed! Why did you feel the compunction to fool the likes of me?"

"Matters of national security," Pryce said affably, "and that is precisely why I've asked you here today."

"Really?" Karkober breathed, her eyes widening.

"Really." He motioned toward the slab. "First, I believe you all knew Teddington Fullmer?"

They stared at the man. "He doesn't look well," Karkober finally squeaked.

"Not a bit," Schreders agreed vehemently. "This is terrible!"

"Very sound observation," Pryce told them. "Unfortunately, it was the price he paid for finding his heart's desire."

"Is he—" Hartov choked—"dead?"

Pryce sighed and looked evenly at the distraught mine owner. "Be careful what you wish for, Asche. You, too, might get killed for it."

"Killed!" Schreders boomed. "You mean this was no accident?" Pryce just stared at him.

"But—but—" the tavern owner stammered "—but this is Lallor! Things like this don't happen here. They can't!"

"Did," Pryce said curtly. "Can." He stepped back and pulled at the lip of the mechanical door. The unlocked gears now moved easily, and Pryce soon revealed the room dug out of the area beyond the cavern wall. "Lady and gentlemen, I give you Geerling Ambersong's secret workshop." He let them have a few seconds to take it all in. "Well, I'm not

actually going to give it to you, but I will let you touch it. In fact, I'm going to let you carry it—piece by piece—out of here."

Schreders was the first to comprehend the words through the haze of his amazement. "Eh? Eh? What was that?"

Pryce snapped his fingers until he got the attention of all of them. "I found Teddington Fullmer's dead body in the middle of my teacher's secret workshop," he almost didn't lie. "So this is no longer my classroom; it is a crime scene. Furthermore, the authorities have discovered evidence of additional foul play. I won't bore you with the details, but rest assured that it is absolutely imperative that the priceless legacy of Geerling Ambersong be moved to safekeeping." He smiled and clasped his hands together like a solicitous concierge. "And we need you three to help."

Schreders snapped to attention. "It would be an honor!" he announced. "Thank you, Mr. Blade, for even thinking of us!"

"Not at all," Pryce replied humbly. "It is our duty and responsibility to protect these materials so vital to our nation's security. We can't safeguard them here any longer—even / do not have the energy to cast a protective spell powerful enough to shield my own master's life's work—so we must turn to you for help." He then turned dismissively to Inquisitrix Lymwich. "And get that body out of here. It's blocking the entrance."

Sheyrhen Karkober naturally took up the rear. Some things never change, Pryce thought as he carefully and quietly approached her. Whether in Merrickarta or Lallor, serving wenches usually deferred in the presence of their superiors or customers ... but only in their presence. Left alone to her own devices, Pryce imagined Sheyrhen could juggle wine casks, but when in a mixed group such as this one, she played it safe by allowing the male egos to lift the big packages and lead the way.

Pryce carefully moved alongside her in the cavern, watching

her walk in her tightly laced waitress costume. "Ah," he said casually, "I see you have the girdle of priestly might."

"I beg your pardon!" Sheyrhen said with offense. "I work very hard to maintain my figure."

Pryce slapped himself on the forehead, but kept pace with her. "No, no," he quickly corrected. "Not yours ... his! Geerling Ambersong's." She looked at him blankly. "It's what you're carrying," he said, pointing at the magnificent jewel- and rune-covered vest in her arms.

She looked at it, then at him. Then she dissolved into giggles. "Oh! Oh, of course!"

"It's not an actual girdle of priestly might, of course," Pryce said casually, walking beside her. "That only appeared after the Time of Troubles. Priests of Mystra took it as a sign that the goddess had regained her power. This is my master's... Geer-ling's ... version of it. It is said to give him greater strength and protection when worn."

"Really?" she said blandly. "How endlessly interesting. Why don't you wear it, then?"

"The power can't be transferred," he told her, taking interest in her disinterest. Was there something she was trying to hide? "In fact," he continued, "it might have a calamitous effect if I were to try it on."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, looking at it now with a certain misgiving and holding it farther away from her. Pryce smiled, noticing how the eyes of each militiaman they passed followed them with only their eyes.

"I'm sure there's no danger to you," Pryce told her, trying to ignore the disconcerting way one militiaman's eyes would stop at the right side of his sockets and the eyes of the one next to him would start. "I totally agree with you. No girdle should mar the perfection of your form."

He watched her reaction carefully. Her eyes shifted toward him with a moment of suspicion, then mutated into a look of pride and pleasure when she decided he wasn't being vulgar. "Thank you, Mr. Blade." He could see she was still

waiting for him to poison the conversation with an ill-chosen, licentious reply.

So he didn't even attempt a "Call me Darling." Instead, he said, 'That was quite a humorous misunderstanding back there.' "When?"

"When I approached." "Oh?"

"Yes, and talked about the girdle." "Oh! Oh, yes."

"I actually haven't had a chance to fraternize much. I've been too busy studying. I leave all the socializing to Gamor Turkal."

He might as well have said "Call me Darling," for the reaction he got. Sheyrhen did not show disappointment, but she grew distant without moving a millimeter away from him. "Gamor," she repeated flatly.

'Yes,' he said. 'You knew him, didn't you?'

"Oh, yes ... I knew him."

Pryce kept walking beside her, but turned his head toward the ceiling. "Ah, yes, Gamor. He always had an eye for a beautiful wench, serving or otherwise. I always think of them as people first and waitresses second. He always thought of them as ... as—

"As chattel?" Karkober said coldly. He looked at her in surprise. However, she did not avert her gaze or soften her retort. "I'm sorry, Mr. Blade, but I didn't like your... friend ... Gamor Turkal. He never once looked at me with anything approaching humanity. If I wasn't a vessel for his fantasies, I was little more than a piece of furniture bringing him his ale." Only then did she lower her head sadly. "Is that so terrible?"

"No," Pryce assured her, looking calmly ahead. 'That's not nearly as terrible as the other thing we've been doing since I first introduced the subject.'

She looked at him with surprise and just a touch of misgiving. "What's that?"

"Speaking of him in the past tense," he revealed with a cheerless smile. "Excuse me, would you?" Pryce hastened

his stride to move down the passageway until he approached Azzo Schreders.

Unlike his serving wench, Schreders seemed honestly glad to see him. "Blade! Let me say how honored I am to be chosen to even touch, let alone carry, such valuable magical items. I'll be telling my grandchildren and great-grandchildren about this! Eh, eh?"

"And hopefully even your not-so-great grandchildren, unless they've been sent to bed early," Pryce quipped feebly. Before the barkeep could summon up a forced laugh, Covington continued. "How could I have thought of anyone but the man who makes Lallor run? Everyone knows that if you need refreshment or information, Azzoparde Schreders is at your service."

The man's wordless acknowledgement was lacking a bit of his previous bonhomie. Pryce continued, unabashed. "How did you secure such a superlative establishment in the first place? Prices must have been prohibitive, especially a building with such an extensive liquor grotto. What's your secret, Azzo?"

The man looked stunned by the questions and more than a bit concerned. "Come, come, Azzo," Pryce said with genuine amusement. "You can tell me. After all, I'm the great Darlington Blade."

"Sir," the tavern master started slowly, losing all familiarity and licking his lips, "I wouldn't want to bore you with the details of my education, training, and experience as a manager of eating and drinking establishments."

"Of course not," Pryce agreed. "But I would like to know, in all seriousness, how a man of your education, training, and... what was the third thing again?"

"Experience."

"Yes, thank you. Experience... What was I saying?"

"In all seriousness... a man of my experience..." "Ah, yes! Tell me, Azzo, how could you not know about these caverns?"

Azzo blinked, swallowed, and replied, "I did." "Yes?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Blade, certainly!" Azzo practically burbled in his rush to confess. "I knew about them all along. This area is attached to my grotto by a small opening high on the rear wall. I knew they were here, but as you can see, I would have had to do extensive renovating to make them suitable for my liquor cellar. Besides, I had no idea where they led to and had no desire for all manner of creatures having access to my liquid refreshments. So I placed a large wine cask over the opening to seal it off." His smile was tentative. "I even filled the cask with our least distinctive vintage."

"Really?" Pryce replied with appreciation. "Not much chance of that particular cask being drunk dry, then, eh? Eh?"

Schreders chuckled nervously at Pryce's imitation of his verbal habit. "You'd be surprised," he said with forced friendliness. "Why, it was the favorite brew of many, shall we say, less discerning palates?"

Pryce chuckled back. "Like Gamor Turkal's?"

Schreders stopped chuckling. He even went a little pale. "Why, yes... come to think of it... it's the only thing Gamor ever drank."

Pryce nodded. "How endlessly interesting," he commented, quoting the nervous serving wench. "Thank you, Azzo. You've told me what I needed to know. Excuse me, won't you?" He quickly bounded over to where Asche Hartov was heading up the retinue. "Ah, Asche, leading the way, I see." The mine owner didn't reply. Pryce tried again. "Spellbooks," he said, glancing at the volumes the man carried.

"You have a solid grasp of the obvious," Hartov said coldly.

"Still angry at me about the false name?"

"Angry? No, not angry. Offended."

"Come now, Asche! You know very well that the nature of our business discussions would have changed had you known I was Darlington Blade!"

"Not at all!"

"Now who's fooling whom?" Pryce exclaimed. "Are you telling me you wouldn't have dropped—or hiked, depending

upon your mood—the price if you had known you were negotiating with the great Darlington Blade? That you wouldn't have at least checked your sources and contacts to see what possible edge you could discover? If you even think of telling me that, then you're not the businessman I respect or know."

While he talked, Pryce could see that Hartov was trying to smother a growing smirk, but he managed to contain his acknowledgment of the truth long enough to say, "Respect?" "Certainly!" Pryce said expansively, putting out his arms. "Everyone from the top of Mount Alue to the tip of Githim knows the name of Asche Hartov, purveyor of high-quality ore." He put his arm around the mine owner's shoulder and spoke directly and quietly into his ear. "In fact, when I saw you in Schreders's tavern the other night, and again the night before that, I couldn't help thinking, Now, what is Asche Hartov doing in Lallor? He doesn't have a vacation home here. And who, in such an exclusive retreat, would be interested in buying ore even Teddington Fullmer wouldn't touch?"

Hartov looked at Pryce's smiling face in surprise, then with a trace of concern.

"Worried that I really am Darlington Blade?" Pryce wondered aloud. "Think I might be able to see right through that thin forehead of yours?" He removed his arm from Asche's shoulder and stepped away. The retinue suddenly stopped, all eyes on the mine owner. The inquisitrixes and militiamen watched intently as Pryce pointed at Hartov.

"Speak now, Asche," Covington demanded, "and speak the truth."

"I—I thought Geerling Ambersong might be interested," the mine owner sputtered, his eyes moving back and forth between Pryce and the inquisitrixes. "I heard he had plans for a skyship. And I knew he would appear for certain at this year's Fall Festival to announce his choice for his successor as primary mage." He stared at Pryce for a moment, then

looked straight ahead. "I—I thought I might confer with him there."

"Fascinating," Pryce judged. "And where did you acquire this fountain of information?"

"What?"

"How did you know all this, Asche?"

"I—I told you, Cost... I mean, Darling... I mean, Blade! You know how it is. I heard a rumor..."

Pryce smiled but kept him on the hook. "From whom?"

"What?"

"Stop stalling for time and answer my questions. Whom did you hear the rumor from?" "From whom? I—I don't—" "You do!" Pryce bellowed. "Who?"

"Gamor!" Hartov yelled, then stumbled. Pryce caught his arm and steadied him. When he was erect again, he couldn't meet Pryce's eyes. "Gamor Turkal," he said miserably.

"Ah, Gamor Turkal," Covington repeated with a tight smile, turning to the others. "Gamor once: a coincidence. Gamor twice: a pattern. Gamor three times: a connection. Gamor four times: a conspiracy!" He turned to the tavern owner, the serving wench, and the mine owner. "Follow me, you three... now."

Pryce marched up to where Berridge Lymwich and Matthau-nin Witterstaet stood on either side of the cavern opening just behind Schreders's restaurant. The opening in the wall had been widened to make room for the small army of security people who secured the location.

Pryce stood beside the gatekeeper as the three suspects emerged, blinking, into the tiny courtyard outside the restau-

rant's back door. Each gave Covington a different look as he or she passed. Sheyrhen: recrimination and concern. Schreders: confusion and apology. Hartov: nervousness and distress. But before any of them could speak, several militiamen and Inquisitrixes resolutely chaperoned them into the establishment.

That left Covington alone in the courtyard with Matthaunin and Berridge. "Anything?" Pryce asked Witterstaet out the corner of his mouth.

Matthaunin shook his head. "Not an ion of magical ability among the three of them."

"Enough guilt and fear to fill a wine cask, however," Lymwich groused. "Any one of them could have killed Fullmer."

"Let thee without guilt take the first sip," Pryce commented, then turned back to Witterstaet. "Do you have any idea what that means?"

"Not a bit, Mister Blade."

"I was afraid of that." He looked to Lymwich, who was shaking her head in disbelief. "Are we ready for our voyage?" he asked her.

Much to his surprise, she gave him a snappy salute, then motioned toward the back door. "Yes, sir. Right this way, sir."

He marveled that there was a sense of humor, or at least irony, beneath her iron foundation. The thought was pushed aside, however, by a growing sense of excitement. He looked at Matthaunin, who smiled and nodded sagely. "Oh, this will be a real treat, Mr. Blade," the gatekeeper said. "It has been quite some time since these old eyes of mine have witnessed a voyage of the magnitude you have requested."

"And been granted, apparently," Pryce said. "Let's go see the vessel that we'll be using, shall we?" He walked quickly through the kitchen and into the bar, the gatekeeper trailing behind.

Normally when one entered Schreders At Your Service by the rear door, the glory that was Lallor would fill his eyes as he passed the bar and walked into the main room. There, Lallor Bay

would be stretched out before him, beyond the crystal-clear windows that covered the front wall of the restaurant.

Pryce retrieved the book he had left behind the bar and then stepped into the central salon. But this time, he could see almost nothing of Lallor. Although the sun was almost a

quarter of the way across the sky, the tables of Schreders were dark and empty. A shadow filled the room, and the bright autumn sunshine was blocked from view. Instead, through the windows, Pryce saw the rich brown beauty of the finest stevlyman wood.

Lymwich and Witterstaet went one way around the tables, and Pryce went the other. They met at the front door and went outside at the same time. The gatekeeper walked to the bow of the huge structure floating outside the restaurant, while Covington moved toward the passenger gangplank at the stern.

Between them, they took in the magnificence of the Great Mystran Skyship Verity.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Too High a Pryce

The skyship was virtually the national symbol of Halruaa. With the exception of fiery Haerlu wine, it was what most people thought of whenever Halruaa was mentioned. Its three towering masts were set in a broad-beamed skyfaring vessel equally at home in the air, on the water, or on land.

Pryce moved through the crowd that was gathering to admire the polished plates along the hull that mimicked the appearance of a dragon turtle. He looked toward Lymwich with an expression that said "nice touch." He looked back toward the hull when he saw she wasn't paying the slightest attention to him. Instead, she was checking an inventory list with the leader of the crew, who knelt in the open door of the hold.

Pryce put his ear close to the thick, shining wood of the hull to listen for the hum of the central silver shaft of levitation and the two golden cylinders of control, one at each end of the ship. The power source had to be recharged once a year by council members. By the powerful sound of the huge ship as it hovered five

feet off the ground and fifteen feet in front of Schreders's door, it must have been recharged very recently.

The ship was luxurious, yet it still had old-fashioned rustic charm. Pryce felt such a sense of welcome that he could hardly wait to get on board. He continued to make his way through the milling crowd of admiring onlookers, Lallor dignitaries, skyship crew members, and security officers.

None gave Darlington Blade the Lallor hello. Instead, they smiled, nodded, and cast approving glances his way. Pryce felt certain that by the time the ship was ready to leave, everyone in Lallor would treat him the same way. Never had Pryce felt such acceptance. These people were not judging his performance. They were really listening. Now, all he had to do was give them something to listen to.

"Who are you?"

Pryce hopped back to avoid bumping into Dearlyn Ambersong. Her eyes were haunted and red-rimmed, with dark circles beneath them. Her skin was pallid. He stopped, leaned toward her, stared, then leaned back again. "You should be on board," he told her quietly.

"Who are you?" she whispered urgently again.

He whispered back. "I'm Darlington Blade."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

Despite all the people around them, the two felt alone. She blinked and her eyes started to get wet. Then her lips grew thin, tight, and bloodless. As he watched, she somehow regained her composure. "You told me you weren't," she said, a deadly chill in her voice.

"You were going to kill me."

"But if you really were Darlington Blade, I couldn't have killed you!"

Even though her voice had begun to rise, Pryce did not alter his manner, volume, or tone. "Yes, but if I weren't Darlington Blade, I most certainly would have hurt you."

She blinked, her mouth opening and closing on that conundrum. "But... you said... my father..."

Very carefully, he placed his hand on her arm, hoping he

could keep her from falling apart. "Miss Ambersong. Dearlyn. Listen to me. I care for..." He swallowed, unable to finish the sentence after everything he had knowingly, and unknowingly, done to her. "I care what you think of me," he was finally able to say. "Get on board the ship. No matter what you may feel, and no matter what you have suffered, this I can promise you: It will all be over soon. Do as I ask. Please."

She stared at him for a few seconds more, then spun on her heel and hurried up the gangplank. Pryce took a deep breath, fighting off a feeling of shame. He straightened his shoulders and reminded himself that he had a difficult and extremely dangerous job to do. He touched the clasp and moved toward the companionway.

Several people he recognized as elders of the council gave him the highest sign of Lallor approval, "the Halruan Salute"—a nod of the head while pointing at the brain with the forefinger. Pryce was pleased to return the sign, hoping he would be living up to it very soon. He allowed himself a nod, minus the brain-pointing, to various other interested parties, including some junior patrol leaders, the head militiamen, and even a few elves and half-elves whose interest in illusion was so great that they were allowed to study in the city.

Finally Pryce made his way through the excited crowd to a walkway that led up to the deck. At the top of the gantry, a young human crew member was checking the passenger list. "Where is the captain?" Pryce inquired.

The crewman pointed toward the upper deck, where an officious older woman in a handsome sky-blue uniform, complete with golden epaulets and silver buttons, stood beside a pair of carved cylinders. Pryce walked quickly past several other crew

members who were bustling around the deck and hopped up the ladder-like steps to where she stood. He put out his hand as he approached her.

"Permission to sail with you, Captain. I am Darlington Blade." Without hesitation, the woman took his forearm in her hand and he gripped hers in return. When people rode in a skyship together, they depended on and trusted each other implicitly. "Captain Renwick Scottpeter, Mr. Blade. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"It's a pleasure for me to be finally met." He looked at the blue sky and the gray clouds off in the distance. "Is everything in readiness for our voyage of sanctuary?"

"The inquisitrixes and priestesses of Mount Talath have prepared a beacon queue for us to follow," Captain Scottpeter reported. "Once we reach a certain altitude, we will be irrevocably drawn to the Central Temple of Mystra, where Greila Sontoin awaits us."

Pryce spun his head toward her. "Greila Sontoin herself?" he asked incredulously.

'To receive the life's work of Geerling Ambersong, personally delivered by Darlington Blade? She said, and I quote, that she 'wouldn't miss it for all the electrum in Zoundar.'"

Pryce smiled back with excitement and just a slight case of nausea. Sontoin was said to possess unearthly wisdom. "I am anxious to see how our meeting goes," he said honestly.

"As I am to see what you have planned for our expedition," said the captain, now surveying the horizon. "I'm told you have a most unique... entertainment... prepared."

Pryce grimaced. That would be the way Lymwich would term it. "I wouldn't precisely call it an entertainment, nor would I say I'm exactly prepared. I do hope, however, that you and your crew have also been advised to be prepared... for anything."

The captain nodded. "Please do not concern yourself on that score, Mr. Blade. You can rest assured that we will sail this ship

with infinite pride and determination no matter what occurs."

'Thank you, Captain. Now, is there some place where I can

make ready for my presentation?"

She led him to her quarters, which were nestled below the upper deck, looking out the stern. After showing him inside, the captain took her leave. The ceiling was low, but otherwise the room was plush and comfortable. A crimson-covered bed was recessed into the wall toward the bow. A table and chairs were placed below windows that looked out the starboard side. An imposing wooden desk rested below the stern windows.

To his relief and growing pleasure, the wardrobe he had asked for was laid out on the bed. Before he concerned himself with it, however, Pryce took a moment to survey Lallor, and Lallor Bay, from above. It was indeed a beautiful city... truly the hidden jewel of Halruaa. Its proudly executed design made it a place to fight for, to die for... and apparently to kill for.

There was a knock at the door. Pryce glanced that way and said, "Yes?"

The halfling grotto manager stuck his head inside. "Blade?"

"Gheevy, my friend!" Pryce said with pleasure. "Do come in!"

The halfling entered, looking deeply concerned. Pryce laughed. "My dear Wotfirr, don't worry. I assure you that I will rest on this voyage!"

"It's—it's not that, Blade. It's... well, how on Toril will you ever pull this thing off?"

Pryce furrowed his brow and came around the table. "What do you mean, my friend? What's troubling you?"

The halfling quickly looked to see if there was anyone else in the hall, then closed the door firmly. "It's like you said when you left the workshop," he said urgently. "We know now that Geerling, Gamor, and Teddington are dead. But there's one more person who is dead, and only we two know it!"

Pryce turned his head to one side, as if he heard something off in the distance. "Who?" he wondered.

"You know!"

"I'm afraid I don't," Pryce said calmly. "Darlington Blade!"

Gheevy hissed. "I am Darlington Blade," Pryce said casually. "Yes, but—"

Suddenly Pryce held up his hand. "Don't say it, Gheevy. I know. But if this is going to work, I have to remember one thing: I am Darlington Blade."

"But you're not!" the halfling wailed in despair. "And you know it!"

"No, I don't," said Pryce flatly, his expression blank. "What?"

"You're wrong, Gheevy. You were wrong when you said that 'only we two' knew one more person was dead, and you're wrong now."

Wotfirr looked intrigued. "Whatever do you mean?"

Pryce held up his forefinger. "The murderer also knows it," he reminded the halfling.

Realization dawned on the halfling's face, followed by storm clouds of anxiety. "Right. So how can you possibly reveal his identity without condemning yourself?"

Pryce just stared at his associate for a few moments, then turned idly toward the starboard window. He looked out while absentmindedly fingering the heavy wooden table.

"An interesting question, that," he said so quietly that Gheevy barely heard him. "Remember what I told you the most important letter was to a detective?"

"Certainly." The halfling nodded. "Y."

"Exactly. Why. As in 'Why has the murderer let me live?' Or 'Why hasn't the murderer exposed me long before now?' "

He cocked an amused eye at the halfling. "Do you have any answers, Gheevy?"

The halfling looked around the cabin helplessly. "No, none at all."

"That's too bad," Pryce Covington said somberly. "Because I think I do." He turned away again to see his reflection in the windows of the captain's cabin. "What if our murderer can't do either of those things?"

The halfling could only stare at the man who would be Darlington Blade, unable to comprehend.

'What do you mean?" he asked.

Pryce went on without looking at him. "Give me a moment alone, would you, my friend?" he asked quietly.

Gheevy took a final worried look at the man he had almost exposed, then subsequently risked his life to protect. "Of course," he said, then left the cabin, carefully and quietly closing the door behind him.

"It's time to depart!" Berridge Lymwich bellowed from the bow. "Crew members, clear the deck and cast off the lines! Move those people back away from the ship!" The crew rushed to insure that the onlookers were clear of the lines, aided by the inquisitrixes, militiamen, and patrols lining the narrow plateau beneath the Verity.

News of a Mystran temple skyship's departure, its hold filled with the magical treasures of Geerling Ambersong, apparently traveled fast, and it appeared as if all the citizens of Lallor had turned out to see them off. Every street and yard along the sloping incline from the city wall to Lallor Bay was filled with people, halflings, elves, and half-elves, waving, setting off harmless magic fireworks, shooting magical streamers, and in general giving the Great Mystra Skyship Verity a magnificent send-off.

Berridge Lymwich turned from the railing to see that no passengers were considering anything as rude as getting skysick or as foolish as trying to disembark. After checking for several moments, she seemed satisfied that all of Blade's suspects were

present and accounted for.

Gheevy Wotfirr gave Berridge Lymwich a meaningful look as he passed. The halfling then slipped between the burly Azzo Schreders and the shapely Sheyrhen Karkober at the port bow. The inquisitrix looked down the deck to see that the stooped, jowly Matthaunin Witterstaet stood near Dearnyn Ambersong, both of whom were watched over by the gaunt Asche Hartov, who lived up to his name by appearing

positively ashen.

Even though they all acted reluctant to participate in this journey, they wouldn't have missed the liftoff for, well, all the elec-trum in Zoundar, Lymwich thought.

At that moment, the Verity started to float skyward.

Renwick Scottpeter handled the carved cylinders like a musical instrument, allowing the levitation fields to be activated at just the right calibration. The liftoff of the big ship never failed to thrill her as it launched into the sea of the sky. She had labored long and vigorously to become a skyship captain, then trained the most capable, prepared, and resolute crew in the realm.

On the bow of the great ship was a beautiful figurehead, shaped by Minsha Tyrpanning, Talathgard's finest sculptor. It was an interpretation of Mystra in flight, created entirely of elec-trum. The goddess's serene, smiling face looked up at the clouds, and her gown-swathed figure seemed to draw the ship irrevocably up toward the heavens. The Verity lifted forty yards from the ground, then slowly started a drifting turn to the northwest.

Lymwich turned her face into the wind and closed her eyes. She tried to feel the powerful magic emanations that would draw the ship unerringly toward Mount Talath, but a voice broke her concentration.

"Tend to your passengers," she heard a melodic voice say. Lymwich opened her eyes to see the disapproving gaze of Mystra Superior Wendchrix Turzihubbard, her direct superior and the principal authority at the Lallor Mystran Inquisitrix Castle. "Do not concern yourself with the flight," the tall, commanding

woman in the regal robes said. "That is what I, and the others guarding the cargo below, are here for."

Her words reminded Lymwich once again that she was not only on this boat in a security capacity but also as a prime suspect—

"Mark two-five-zero-zero!" the bowman cried, his call being

echoed until it reached the captain. "Mark-two-five-zero-zero!" she responded, moving the carved cylinder slightly so the climb was less steep. The heavy ship seemed to move along the calm air currents like a soap bubble, rising in small, smooth fits and starts.

"Mark three-zero-zero-zero!" cried the bowman.

"Mark three-zero-zero-zero!" cried the aftwoman.

"Lock on three-zero-zero-zero!" Scottpeter called. She expertly moved the cylinders until the ship leveled off. Dearnyn watched the captain enviously, thinking that her passion for her work rivaled that of the finest musician. Renwick played the levitation fields of the ship as if she were a conductor directing a symphony.

Dearnyn drank in the view of the skies above and the ground below. If she raised her head and ignored the handsome, shining deck, she could almost believe that she herself was flying. Then she felt a chill from the northwest and quickly hugged her cloak around her.

Dearnyn stepped down the ladderlike steps to the main deck, where she saw Azzo Schreders with his arm around a shivering Sheyrhen Karkober, while Matthaunin and Asche bundled up their own coats around their throats. Suddenly the three masts grew dark red, and the need to fight the chill was eliminated. Heat magically emanated from the pillars, extending to encompass the entire deck space.

"Navigator!" Scottpeter called from her post.

"Aye, Captain," the female elf answered through an open window behind Renwick.

"Course verified?"

"Course verified, ma'am. Two hundred and fifty miles northwest on an exact line of fifty-four degrees."

"Excellent. Inquisitrix Lymwich?" Scottpeter called.

"Here, Captain!" Berridge shouted back, resisting an urge to sneak a look at her superior's reaction.

"We have reached our cruising altitude. The Verity is at your disposal. Please be kind enough to prepare your

passengers."

"Yes, ma'am!" Berridge turned toward the others. "All right, everyone gather around the center mast. The great Darlington Blade requests your attention."

The passengers made their way, some more reluctantly than others, to the area around the central pillar, around whose base was carved a visual history of the ship. Sheyrhen, in particular, marveled at depictions of flying dragons, great storms, and hordes of sky pirates. She turned only when she heard the cabin door behind them slam open. She turned to see what everyone else was already staring at.

Pryce Covington stood at the guidance rod of the ship, dressed in incredibly splendid robes of red and black. Shining from his breast was the Ambersong clasp that marked him as the great Darlington Blade. Completing the picture was the huge, leatherbound book he held in one arm. He stood before them, looking toward their destination as the clouds fittingly darkened overhead.

He opened his mouth and spoke.

"Excuse me for a second, would you?" He ran to close the heavy cabin door. "I wasn't prepared for the wind up here," he apologized to Scottpeter.

The captain laughed quietly. "The wind has a tendency to be rather strong at these heights," she informed him.

Pryce walked quickly back to the banister overlooking the main deck. He placed the spine of the book on the polished railing. " 'When you eliminate the impossible,' he called to them, 'whatever is left... no matter how improbable ... has to be the

truth.'" Pryce looked up. "This was the teaching that my master lived by." For effect, he let the book fall to the deck with a bang that seemed to echo beyond the gathering clouds.

"But my master is dead," he told them. 'You have known for half a day what I knew even before I set foot in Lallor.' They stood and stared at him, waiting for the next revelation. 'You

had never seen me before," Pryce continued, leaving the book near the captain and beginning to descend the ladderlike steps to the main deck, "and you never would have seen me at all had my teacher not been murdered. The reason—the only reason—that I came to Lallor was to find the killer."

He looked from one face to the next, registering their expressions of stupefaction, regret, concern, and recrimination. He took his first step among them. "Does this news surprise you?" he asked, putting his arms out wide. 'You all know my reputation: I'm an adventurer. What do I need of an exclusive land of leisure?"

'You—you knew all along?" Lymwich sputtered.

He turned to look directly at her. "I found his body by a tree when I arrived from the north," he said evenly, refusing to even hazard a glance in Gheevy's direction. "Next to the corpse of Gamor Turkal... hanged by the neck from the curve of the Mark of the Question."

That elicited an audible gasp from the thicket of suspects. Pryce set the scene for them, letting Geerling become the second corpse. It was the only way to feel his way through this murderous maze without revealing his actual identity.

"Oh, my deities!" Azzo breathed when Pryce had finished. "Murder? Here in Lallor?" He almost jumped when Covington suddenly lanced a forefinger at him.

"Exactly!" Covington cried. "Murder? In Halruaa? Incredible! Inconceivable. Absurd! What a heartless, wicked, brainless thing to do!" He turned slowly in a full circle, seemingly trying to comprehend the concept. "This is a community of the most successful, most powerful wizards in the nation! Who in his right mind would murder someone here?"

"And not just anyone," Pryce continued, wagging his forefinger. "A primary mage, no less, and his assistant. The assistant?" Pryce shrugged. "Not really a problem. But why hang him at the Question Tree, of all places? Why not just..."

well... club him and feed him to the jackals in the hills?" As he turned, he couldn't help seeing Gheevy cringe. He didn't let it faze him. If he was to survive this thing, there had to be as much truth as possible mixed in with the rest.

"But a primary mage? What could have possibly convinced an individual to take such a risk? And why leave him at one of the most recognizable landmarks in the area?" He looked into each face for an answer but found none. He turned toward the upper deck. "Captain Scottpeter! Do you know the most important thing to trust in a murder investigation?" Scottpeter reacted as if Pryce were speaking ancient script, but she understood nevertheless. "No, Mr. Blade," she called back. "I'm happy to tell you that I have never required the knowledge." She glanced at her navigator, who had come out to witness this unique experience. "And I hope to the cloud dragons that I never will," she whispered to her.

Pryce turned from the captain to the others, moving slowly among them. "In a murder investigation, you can't trust your friends...." He looked pointedly at Asche Hartov. "You can't trust your teachers...." He looked at Matthaunin. "You can't trust the authorities____" He looked at Lymwich. "You can't

trust your sisters...." He looked at Dearlyn. "You can't even trust a lover." He let his last glance rest on Sheyrhen before he walked past them all and talked idly to the sky.

"There is only one thing you can trust," he said. "M.O.M."

"Tour—your mother?" Lymwich stammered incredulously.

"No," Pryce corrected, walking back to them and counting on three fingers as he spoke. "Means. Opportunity. Motive. M.O.M." Before they could react to this, Pryce continued. "Means. Who

had the means to kill Gamor Turkal?" He looked at them. "Anyone of you, I would imagine. He was hanging by his neck from the branch of a tree. He was certainly not a heavy man. Once he was unconscious, I imagine that any one of you could have accomplished the deed."

Each looked suspiciously at the others until Pryce finally let them off the hook. "Ah, but who had the means to kill Geerling Ambersong?" Pryce shook his head sadly. "Now, that's a problem ... especially because even I could discern no obvious cause of death."

"Now, wait a moment," Lymwich interrupted irritably, stepping forward from the crowd. "Wait just a moment! Where are their bodies? Why haven't I—I mean we—been given the opportunity to examine them?"

Pryce caught a glimpse of Gheevy's pale face over Lymwich's shoulder before he plunged on. "The situation necessitated that I take precautions with both corpses, Inquisitrix Lymwich. I had to ensure that materials vital to the safety and welfare of our entire nation did not fall into the wrong hands." He could see Gheevy looking as if he were about to have a seizure, certain that this explanation would never pass muster.

The halfling was nearly right. Berridge went face-to-face with Pryce, seething. "Are you saying you don't trust the disciples of Mystra to—"

"That's enough, Inquisitrix Lymwich!" Mystra Superior Turzihubbard snapped. The imperious leader had slid silently behind the smaller woman. "If the great Darlington Blade felt that precautions had to be taken that precluded our authority, then that's good enough for me." But she gave Pryce a piercing parting glance and added pointedly, "For now."

Pryce grinned sheepishly. Even so, he was grateful for the reprieve, as short-term as it might be. "We were talking about means, Inquisitrix Lymwich," he chided. "And the fact that I could find no cause for my master's death."

"Very well," Berridge huffed, straightening her already straight uniform. "Go on."

"Thank you." Pryce turned his attention back to the others. "Any one of us could have killed Gamor Turkal, but why? Why kill anyone? To gain more land? To get more power?

These are common motives for killing, but there's a difference between killing in battle and murder. There's killing in Halruaa every day. Ores kill ogres, ogres kill giants, giants kill people, people kill each other—sadly, it's happening all the time.

"But such is the nature of good versus evil," he stressed. "Killing occurs when good people must defend themselves against evil people for the good of the many. Murder happens when the battle between good and evil is lost inside one individual."

He held up his forefinger, then slowly let it curl back into his fist. "The great priest Sante wrote that when a good person is doomed, he closes his door and murders himself. But when an evil person is doomed, he opens his door and murders someone else. That, I'm afraid, is what happened here. Someone had come to the end of his morality. But why? What is the most obvious motive for these murders?" He pointed with both hands to the deck. "We're standing over it. Geerling Ambersong's life's work. Enough magic items and spellbooks to make everyone on board this ship wealthy beyond his grandest dreams."

He pointed at Berridge Lymwich. 'To you, it was an end to your ambitious means." He pointed at Dearlyn Ambersong. 'To you, it was a birthright." He pointed at Matthaunin Witterstaet, Labor's jack-of-all-trades and primary gatekeeper. 'To you, it was a way to become the one thing you could never become while Geerling lived." He used two fingers to point at Azzo Schreders and Sheyrhen Karkober. 'To the two of you, it meant that whatever you wanted, you could have." Finally he pointed at Asche Hartov, mine owner. "And to you, it meant the biggest business deal you could ever hope to make."

The suspects looked from Pryce to each other. They began to mutter, even apologize, when Pryce continued briskly. "So much for motive," he said dismissively. "Now we really separate the insidious from the innocent. Opportunity

knocks. And who among you had the opportunity to murder anyone, let alone my master and his assistant?" He considered the nervous group.

"Matthaunin Witterstaet?" he wondered, then shook his head. "It's hard to believe anyone spending twelve hours beneath a watchful eye while studying the means, motive, and opportunities of hundreds of immigrants would have the lime or inclination to confront a mage and kill him.

"Sheyrhen Karkober? Is it possible that someone who appears so guileless and acts so silly is capable of plotting the coldblooded murder of a mage in the middle of a city of mages?" He nodded curtly. "Possible." She gasped. "But not likely," he concluded. She relaxed, but not for long.

"Besides," Pryce continued, "she was too busy hiding her affair with Gamor Turkal from the man who has secretly been her devoted paramour for years."

"Sheyrhen!" the restaurant owner shouted like a wounded bull. "How could you—"

Pryce cut off any further exchange between the two. "Forgive her, Azzoparde," he told him, stepping between the burly bar-keep and the shamed serving wench. "I'm sure Gamor pressured her unmercifully and made many tempting promises of wealth and fame he had no intention of keeping. I'm also sure that it was only one night, and she regretted it so deeply and was so intent on keeping you from being hurt that she allowed herself to become a murder suspect before she would admit the unfortunate truth."

Pryce moved his head so Azzo could see Karkober nodding anxiously, then quickly straightened to lock eyes with the restaurant proprietor. "But you yourself aren't out of the woods yet, Azzoparde Schreders. Although I know that the hours needed to

run a successful tavern are long, you have your own secret, don't you?" He stared at the bearded, burly man until Azzo's gaze wavered. Only then did Pryce shake his head. "You knew, didn't you? Just as Sheyrhen was keeping the secret

of her one-night stand, you were keeping your knowledge of it from her, weren't you?" The burly tavern owner said nothing. Instead, he looked sheepishly down at the deck. Karkober ran into his arms.

Pryce stepped back, a small smile crossing his face. "No, although you might have the urge to kill Gamor Turkal for what he did," he told the burly man embracing the beautiful waitress, "I don't think you had the time or inclination to murder a mage."

"How—how did you know?" Azzo wondered.

"You forget," Pryce said with a grin. "I knew Gamor Turkal, too... probably better than all of you put together! And then... I saw the way you looked at Sheyrhen when you thought she had called me 'darling' in the bar last night. The rest was easy." He sniffed modestly.

He turned quickly from the visibly relieved barkeep to the defiant inquisitrix. "Berridge Lymwich," he mused aloud.

"She certainly has cunning and desire that know few reins____" He stared

hard at the cold-eyed woman who faced him with her chin thrust forward.

He continued, his tone softening. "But she also has an entire castle of sisters who spend all day and night trying valiantly to teach her... that ambition without wisdom is meaningless."

Lymwich held her defiant pose for a moment more. Then the words made it past her mental defenses, and she blinked. Her stare wavered and she turned quickly to look at her inquisitrix leader.

WendchrixTurzihubbard smiled benevolently and slowly nodded.

As Berridge Lymwich looked down at the deck, her fists clenching and unclenching, Pryce stepped carefully around her

and faced the mine owner. "And now we come to Asche Hartov, visitor to our fair shore____"

"All right, all right!" the gaunt man exploded, surprising everyone, including Covington. "You want to know why I came to Lallor? I'll tell you why. Did I have the opportunity to meet with Geerling Ambersong and Gamor Turkal? Yes, I did, but I didn't kill them! I tell you, I didn't!"

"Wait a minute," Pryce cried, trying to mentally catch up with the mine owner's words. "If you didn't kill them, what did you do, Asche?"

Hartov stared at Pryce, his lips trembling. 'You know, Blade,' he whispered, almost blubbing. "Don't you?"

"I only think," Pryce stressed. "You know."

"Yes," Hartov cried, hiding his face in his hands. "I plotted with them—Fullmer and Turkal and 1.1 admit it!"

Pryce hastily looked at Lymwich and Turzihubbard, holding his arm out to keep them back. "To do what, Asche?" he demanded. "Speak now, or they'll disintegrate you. You plotted with them to do what?"

The mine owner's head shot up, tears blinking out of his eyes, remembering where he was... and what powerful people were in attendance. "Not to kill anyone! To steal magic artifacts! We only planned to plunder the secret workshop, I swear!"

"Only to plunder the workshop" Lymwich cried, but a quick look from Pryce shut her up.

"Details," Covington demanded urgently of the mine owner.

"In twenty-five words or less."

"Gamor—it was Gamor! He came to me with the idea. Teddington and I met with him several times. Turkal said he could get us inside. Fullmer would transport the material, and I would secrete it in one of my empty mines."

"It would take three people days to empty the workshop!" Dearlyn Ambersong interjected angrily.

"Not all at once!" Hartov babbled. "A bit at a time."

"But then Gamor was gone," Pryce said soothingly. "Wasn't he, Asche?"

"Yes," Hartov said, grabbing that reality like a life preserver.

"I looked all over Lallor for him. Fullmer... Fullmer made me stay until we heard from him. Curse him!"

"Ah, yes," said Pryce. "Teddington Fullmer." He turned away from the shuddering mine owner for the moment and addressed the others. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is as good a time as any to reveal to you a most important principle of detection. The most important letter for a detective is Y. And the most important why at the moment is this: Why hasn't the murderer killed me?"

The question caught everyone off guard for a moment. "Think about it," Pryce suggested. "The murderer was powerful enough to kill Geerling Ambersong, and I am merely his lowly student. Here I am, devoting all my energy to finding my master's killer, and what happens to me?" He looked resolutely at Gheevy. "Nothing. Why?"

It was safe to say that they were all perplexed. Pryce continued. "When you think about it, there can only be one reason_____"

Mystra Superior Wendchrix Turzihubbard wasn't interested in playing guessing games. "And what is that, Mister Blade?" She made it clear by her tone that the answer should be forthcoming immediately.

He looked at her calmly, pausing as thunder rumbled in the distance. "Because the murderer can't."

"Why not?" Turzihubbard retorted evenly.

He looked directly at her, but he spoke to them all. "Because the person who killed my teacher and master, Geerling Ambersong, is also dead."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Blade Straight and True

The sky rumbled once more. Pryce looked up to see storm clouds gathering directly in the ship's path. "Captain!" he called. "Can we avoid the storm?"

"No," Scottpeter called back. "But the beacon from Mount Talath will pull us through. It may be rough, but we'll make it!"

"Fair enough." Pryce turned back to the others. "But it doesn't give us much time."

"Mr. Blade!" Turzihubbard called out. "Explain yourself!"

He looked at her helplessly. "This is the only thing that makes sense, Mistress Turzihubbard—especially if you follow Sante's teachings, which my master most certainly did. I ask you all to think about who else is dead."

He looked from one to the next as he carefully explained. "Gamor is gone. Geerling is gone. We will never know who killed them unless we solve the mystery of who murdered Teddington Fullmer."

It was silent on deck except for the creaking of stvelyman wood and an ominous rumbling far off in the sky. Finally Matthaunin Witterstaet managed to choke out a laugh. "My word, Mr. Blade. It sounds rather like the sort of conundrum I set for my immigration test"

Pryce turned to him and smiled. "Yes, Matthaunin, that's true. For instance, why can't a person living in Halarahh be buried west of the River Ghalagar?" They all looked at each other for the answer, but it was forthcoming only from Pryce. "Because he's still living. Remember?" A few of them started to laugh, but Pryce added, "Unlike Teddington Fullmer." That sobered them up again.

"All right," Pryce stated, taking a position in the middle of the deck. "Think. Remember that most of you were in Schreders's tavern the afternoon I spoke with Fullmer in the grotto. Any one of you could have overheard us planning a meeting for that night. But who is the only one who could have killed him and then, more importantly, placed him in the locked secret workshop?"

Pryce glanced at the clouds, which were boiling and turning black, then moved in among his audience for the intellectual kill. He looked from Witterstaet to Lymwich and back again. "You two told me. How much magic do the people we pressed into moving the contents of the workshop possess?"

"Why, none," said Matthaunin.

"And why would they kill Fullmer, anyway? To get the workshop for themselves?" Pryce waved that thought aside with a look of distaste. "A motive shared by all is no longer really a valid motive. Look for an unusual motive, a motive with a difference. In that motive the truth may lie."

He pointed at the remorseful mine owner. "Would he kill Fullmer in order to get out of their plan to plunder the workshop? I don't think so." He pointed at Azzo and Karkober. "They were serving food and drink to dozens of people at the time Fullmer was attacked. The kitchen crew will corroborate that they never left the dining area."

"None of them possesses magical abilities," Lymwich spoke up. "And I was keeping my shift in front of the orbs of eyewitness in the Mystran Inquisitrix Castle, along with several of my sister inquisitrixes."

Both Pryce and the Mystra Superior looked at Lymwich in surprise. How dare she interrupt this denouement? But her purpose became clear when she turned to confront Pryce on the skyship deck. "There was only one other person with the necessary magical power," she said accusingly. Lymwich pointed directly at him. "You."

Pryce Covington did not panic at her assertion. He even managed a small smile. "I didn't do it," he said mildly.

"Can you prove it?" Lymwich retorted, feeling a sense of triumph welling up in her. But her sense of accomplishment was short-lived.

"I can," he nodded. "I have a witness."

"Who?" Lymwich asked incredulously.

"Geerling Ambersong."

The suspects sputtered and cried out, and Lymwich even laughed derisively, but the Mystra Superior quieted them all. "The haunt!" she exclaimed.

Pryce nodded. "The haunt," he agreed. "Geerling Ambersong's restless spirit. He told us—Dearlyn, Gheevy, and me—who had killed him."

"He did not!" Dearlyn flared, marching forward. 'That's not true. I told you what happened, Berridge, and the halfling corroborated my story.'

For the first time, Lymwich looked indecisive. 'You said Geerling's spirit possessed the still-living body of Teddington Fullmer. And when you asked him who he was killed by, he first said Darlington Blade, then paused. Then he said Darlington Blade

wasn't the one who killed him. It was—"

" 'It was the one behind him,' " Pryce finished for her. " 'Behind him.' Interesting choice of words. Not 'the man behind him,' but 'the one behind him.' Behind whom? Geerling Ambersong? Darlington Blade? Me?"

"What is this nonsense?" Dearlyn confronted him before anyone took careful note of his ironic list of suspects. "How can you say that these words prove anything?"

Pryce frowned and shrugged. "Well, perhaps not words, then, Miss Ambersong. What about actions?"

"Actions? What actions?"

"Ah, I see you didn't tell Berridge everything, did you?" He turned toward the halfling. "You remember, don't you, Gheevy? When Geerling was trying to control Fullmer's body, he seemed to point at me. Then when Miss Ambersong tried to kill me, he loomed up behind her—"

"Yes," croaked Gheevy, his voice cracking from so little use.

"That's true! He fell on her, saying you had not killed him, that it was the person behind!"

"What are you two going on about?" Dearlyn interrupted angrily. "This is absurd!"

Pryce directed his words at her with quiet conviction. "A haunt's statement is sacrosanct," he informed her. "As are, I imagine, his actions. So I have no choice but to state categorically that you are, and were, 'behind' Darlington Blade metaphorically, physically, and actually quite literally."

Dearlyn looked at Pryce as if he had suddenly turned into a

death knight. "You—you can't be serious!"

"I'm sorry, Dearlyn," he apologized sincerely. "But it had to be you. There is no one else."

"B-But why?" she cried. "How can it possibly be me?"

"Because," Pryce said, "you were the only one with the proper magic to accomplish it."

Had they been frozen in time, there would have been no less movement from the others. Only Dearlyn Ambersong's face moved. Her mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. Her forehead became a sea of creases. Her eyes wavered and shook, her mind unable to accept the depth of his betrayal.

The sky took that moment to split open with thunder. The sudden sharp crack shook everyone. Karkober even let out a small shriek. Dearlyn may have said, "Do you know what you've done?" but Pryce couldn't be sure.

"Magic?" Lymwich declared. "What magic?"

Pryce didn't take his eyes off Dearlyn Ambersong. "Don't you see? It had to be her. The haunt fell on her. She was the only one with no alibi. She was the only one allowed free, unattended travel throughout the city. She is truly the one 'behind' Darlington Blade—physically in the workshop, but also during her father's entire life."

"She killed her own father?" Matthaunin asked incredulously. Only then did Pryce take his eyes off her. "No," he explained. "Gamor Turkal killed Geerling Ambersong. She killed Gamor."

It was the inquisitrix's turn to be flabbergasted. "Gamor?" Lymwich exclaimed. "You must be joking!" "Gheevy said you wouldn't believe it," Pryce mused philosophically, "but the one positive thing I remember anyone in Lallor saying about Turkal was that he had an incredible memory. I didn't realize why that stuck in my mind until now. He must have been memorizing everything Geerling had been teaching me."

"Nonsense!" Lymwich cried.

"Unlikely," Witterstaet agreed.

Pryce whirled on Hartov. "Asche! You said Gamor contacted you. How did he accomplish that?" "What do you mean?"

"Did he send a messenger, come in person, or what?" "Why, no. He came to me... in a vision!" "Like dust taking form in a shaft of light... his face... talking to you?" "Why, yes."

Pryce turned back, his arms out. "You see? Magic. He was using unique Ambersong magic. And he had conceived of a way to steal the Ambersong legacy with the help of people he knew back in Merrickarta, which is where he came from. Only Geerling must have found out. But when he confronted Gamor, just before I arrived for a rendezvous, Gamor surprised him. Even with magical knowledge, the only way someone like Turkal could have killed someone like Geerling was through what is known in the lexicon as 'a lucky shot'."

He turned back to Dearlyn sadly. "But Gamor wasn't the only one taking advantage of Geerling's magical studies, was he? You, too, had been soaking up what you felt was rightfully yours, quite possibly following Gamor, your father, or both to eavesdrop on the lessons in magic. So you were there to witness what Gamor had done, and then you gave him a shot of your own."

"How can you even think that?" Dearlyn cried.

Pryce rolled right on. "But you couldn't just contact the authorities after you killed your father's murderer—not without revealing your own illegal knowledge. Inquisitrix Lymwich would have been overjoyed to enfeeble you for such an offense."

Dearlyn flashed a look of anger at the inquisitrix, who stiffened, then stared back at Pryce with pure hatred. "You have destroyed me. Don't you know that?" Dearlyn asked.

"As you destroyed Gamor?" he responded. "You had to make it look like a suicide, so you made it appear that Turkal had hanged himself."

"Blade, really!" a shocked Witterstaet piped in.

"Matthaunin, divide thirty by half and add ten," Pryce

snapped with irritation. 'Tell me your answer when this is all over!' Covington quickly returned his attention to Dearlyn Ambersong. "You used your ill-gotten magic to lift Gamor's already dead body, but I'm sure you knotted the rope around his neck yourself!"

"How can you be so sure?" Lymwich growled skeptically.

Pryce looked this way and that, stopping only when he saw Dearlyn's staff leaning against the first mast. He leapt over and grabbed it. "How many times have you thrust this in my face?" he demanded, shaking it at her. "And each time I knew I had seen something that bothered me_____"

He grabbed the horsehair covering and pulled it back to reveal the garden implements attached to the end by leather thongs. "Gardening tools indeed! This is nothing more than your way to carry a concealed weapon. But that's not what betrayed you. Each of those tools is tied to the staff by a very interesting knot .. the exact same knot that attached the rope around Gamor Turkal's neck.¹"

Lightning flashed down to strike the central mast, dancing in spider-webbed sparks all the way down to the deck. The thunder that followed a split second later was deafening.

"Captain!" Turzihubbard cried.

"Don't panic!" Scottpeter called back. "The masts act as lightning rods. The entire craft is grounded. We've been through storms like this before. Just a few more minutes and it all should be over."

The others began to look up at the storm clouds nervously. Pryce quickly pressed his advantage. "You always felt that you came second in your father's life," he accused Dearlyn. "You didn't really want his magical artifacts, which is why you never tried to block our moving of the Ambersong legacy to Mount Talath. No, you wanted your father's respect and his love. And ultimately you murdered out of love!"

"But what about Fullmer?" Lymwich called over the continuing thunder. "Wasn't he killed to prevent his robbery of the workshop?"

"Yes," Pryce answered, "but not because his killer wanted the spells for herself. She killed him to protect her family's good name. Had Fullmer, Turkal, and Hartov gotten away with their thievery, the name of Ambersong would have been forever besmirched ... especially if his stolen magic was ever used against Lallor or Halruaa."

"But Fullmer wasn't killed with magic!" Witterstaet said.

"Killed, no," Pryce explained. "But moved into the workshop, yes!" He turned to explain to Turzihubbard. "Sadly, a locked room mystery is essentially pointless in Lallor ... there are too many magicians who can easily accomplish the feat!" He turned back to Dearlyn, pointing her own horsehair staff at her. "You were the only one left besides me with the magical knowledge necessary to circumvent the workshop's special door. You couldn't gain entry yourself, but you could magically move a dying body into the room!"

At that moment, the first fat bead of rain slapped into the deck. A rapid-fire barrage of lightning and thunder sent the suspects scurrying. Pryce stood his ground, however, and shouted the rest over the noise of the storm. "Luckily for you, your father's own haunt overwhelmed any echo of your magic. Even if Witterstaet had perceived its shadow, it's likely that he would have recognized it only as Ambersong magic, not Dearlyn Ambersong magic!"

At the mention of her name, Dearlyn suddenly grabbed the shank of the staff and tore it from Pryce's grip. In a split second, she had it whirled around and pointing directly at Covington's heart.

"Dearlyn Ambersong!" Turzihubbard boomed from the rail as more rain began to smack onto the deck. "Threatening Darlington Blade will gain you nothing!"

"Darlington Blade?" Dearlyn cried as another thunderbolt filled the sky. "This isn't Darlington Blade! He told me so himself!"

Gheevy gritted his teeth and sucked in his breath, but Pryce held his ground, his palms up in innocent supplication.

"Come now, Miss Ambersong," Lymwich said, both threateningly and soothingly. "It's too late for wild accusations. They won't help you now."

Dearlyn laughed into the rain, which now pounded the deck like thousands of tiny fists. "No! Nothing will help me now!" she screamed into the wind.

Lymwich took another step toward her, but the deck was getting slippery and the storm was becoming blinding. Dearlyn backed up, keeping the staff between Pryce, who hadn't moved, and Lymwich, who wouldn't stop moving.

"I won't be enfeebled," the daughter of Geerling Ambersong warned. "Not by the likes of you." But she saved her greatest animosity for the man who had accused her. "You!" she said miserably. "So the 'great' Darlington Blade triumphs once more. I'm 'behind' you again, am I? Well, at least this will be the last time!"

Dearlyn hurled her staff with all her might. It sliced through the air, started to curve, then went directly between Lymwich's legs, tripping her. The inquisitrix went down in a heap.

Dearlyn turned and raced toward the bow of the skyship as the Verity entered into the very worst of the storm. Lightning bolts danced around her as rain splashed and thunder rolled. Pryce charged after her, the lightning bolts slashing vengefully across his path.

Dearlyn leapt atop the railing, holding onto the figurehead of Mystra with one hand. She turned to see Pryce diving after her just as a lightning bolt smashed down directly into his chest.

The others gasped and fell back, their hands and arms shielding their eyes. Pryce danced in place, his toes actually leaving the deck as the bolt crackled and coursed... into the cloak clasp.

For a second it was hard to tell whether the bolt was going in or coming out of the sea of brilliant sparks. But then the lightning was gone, and Pryce stood six feet from Dearlyn,

completely unscathed. The only evidence of the strike was a small wisp of smoke rising from the cloak clasp.

Covington blinked in surprise as Dearlyn threw her head back, laughing hysterically. 'The great Darlington Blade! Even the gods can't touch him!' Then she looked at him evenly, all hysteria leaving her voice. "I knew there was good reason to hate you."

And with those final words, Dearlyn Ambersong stepped off the rail and disappeared into the clouds below.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Pryce Is Right

'Twenty-five,' said Gheevy Wotfirr. "Wrong," said Pryce Covington.

It was a beautiful autumnal afternoon, and they were walking through the rolling green hills southwest of the Lallor Gate. It was in the direction completely opposite from the Mark of the Question Tree. Behind them, beyond the Lallor walls, the Fall Festival was in full swing. Even from here, the two could hear the music and revelry that marked the celebration.

"Divide thirty by half..." Gheevy considered again.

"Yes?"

"And add ten." 'Yes.'

'Twenty-five.' "No."

"Argh!" Gheevy groaned, balling his little fists. To say that the remainder of the voyage to Mount Talath had been uneventful would be an understatement, considering what had come before. Incredibly, within minutes of Dearlyn Ambersong's leap, the Verity had cleared the storm clouds, and the rest of the journey was made in blue skies and sunshine.

No one on board, however, was in a mood to appreciate it. Karkober couldn't stop crying, while the rest of the people who had once been suspects either sat in motionless shock or wandered around in a reflective fog. Despite that, the grandeur of Mount Talath was such that even the most

aggrieved individual couldn't help but be overwhelmed by its majesty. Then there was the powerful presence of Priestess Greila Sontoin.

Wearing spectacular ceremonial robes, she had swept down a long runway that was swathed in thick blue velvet. There was a big smile on her pale, lined face, but she looked remarkably good for a person rumored to be more than a hundred and twenty-five years old. To the crew's surprise, and Pryce's shock, she opened her arms to welcome the great Darlington Blade, who shyly came forward, falling to his knees before her.

" 'One knee,' " he later told the enraptured crew on the trip back. "She actually whispered to me, 'One knee is all that is required. One knee looks like I'm going to bless you. Two knees and you look like you're going to be sick all over my shoes!'" But no matter how they begged and entreated him, he wouldn't tell them the subject of their short, but extremely private, talk.

"Rest assured that the legacy of Geerling... and Dearnyn... Ambersong is in the best possible hands," he told them. "And that you are all welcome to visit anytime ... and perhaps even enter the Order of Mystra to learn the wisdom of the ages."

That was when Matthaunin Witterstaet finally gave Pryce the answer to his conundrum.

'Think, Gheevy," Pryce insisted, making it to the top of another green, grassy hill beyond the Lallor Gate. "Half. By half. What's half?"

"Of thirty? Fifteen."

"Yes and no. You'll never get anywhere if you don't listen. Fifteen is half, right? So?"

"So... thirty divided by half is fifteen!"

"No, no! You're not listening to the actual problem!"

They kept going at it until they came to the crest above a low, rolling valley. There, nestled in the gentle slope below, was a small but comfortable-looking abode made of stone,

wood, and plaster.

"There it is," Pryce said. 'Teddington Fullmer's cottage." He started down toward it, the wind rippling his clothes and hair, but Gheevy had only one thing on his mind.

"All right, I give up," said the halfling, coming up from behind Pryce. 'You tell me. What's the answer to your conundrum?"

"I'm not telling."

"Oh, come on, Blade!"

"No," Pryce laughed and then began to run. 'You have to get it yourself."

And so it went, until they reached the cottage's unlocked door.

"Half is half," Gheevy was saying as Pryce stepped inside. 'You cut something in half..." Then he, too, stepped inside. All conversation stopped as they looked in awe at the inside of the cottage.

The furniture wasn't much—a simple but comfortable table, utilitarian chairs, a writing desk, and a bed—but all four walls, including the windows, were lined with row upon row of bottles of every shape, size, and color. Light from the windows shone through the bottles, creating a rainbow effect.

This has to be the most complete collection of bottled liquor anywhere in Lallor," Gheevy breathed in wonder. "Maybe in all Halruaa!"

"Well, he was a trader in liquid refreshments," Pryce said, "when he wasn't plotting the theft of magical items, that is."

"So the Mystra Superior told you you could have first pick?" Gheevy asked.

"He's a convicted conspirator," Pryce told the halfling as he walked slowly around the large single room, "and a murder victim. She said I should at least come out here and see if there was anything of interest for the castle in my capacity as Lallor's new primary mage."

Gheevy laughed in mirth and amazement. "Blade, Blade,

Blade. How on Toril are you going to—"

"I haven't officially accepted the post yet," he interrupted.

"But you must!" Gheevy contended. "You've come this far. What else would you do?"

"Hey, I'm Darlington Blade!" Pryce reminded him. "I'm supposed to be a great wandering hero, a legendary traveling adventurer, remember? Besides, I think I'd have more luck playing off my reputation to a new audience every night. I think the element of surprise is kind of lost here____"

"Nonsense!" Gheevy jovially argued. "You're a part of Lallor history now... and what a history! To these people, a man who has had a private audience with Greila Sontoin can do no wrong." Then his voice became serious. "And, remember, you have friends here, too. Where else, in all of Halruaa, can you say that is true?"

Pryce looked askance at the halfling, one eyebrow raised.

"Well, if I'm going to even think about staying here," he exclaimed, "I'll need to know that my friends are smart enough to figure out a simple conundrum!"

"Blade, I tell you I can't—"

"Come, come. I'll make it easy. What do you do when you divide by half?"

"Half of thirty is—"

"No, no, no. Stop thinking that way."

Gheevy Wotfirr grew silent, thinking. Finally he ventured, "Divide thirty by half? Half of thirty is fifteen."

Pryce shook his head with a grin. "Not half of thirty. Just half!" "Half?" Gheevy said in wonder. "Half is... half is—"
'Yes?'

"Half is... zero-point-five." "There!"

"Thirty divided by zero-point-five is... sixty!" "Now add ten."

"Seventy. The answer is seventy!"

"Excellent, my dear Wotfirr," Pryce said proudly. "Elementary numerology."

Gheevy laughed. "Amazing, Blade. How do you do it?"

Pryce waved a hand airily. "It's a gift. Or a curse, depending

upon your point of view. After a hard life and a tough job, I've learned that little things are almost always important. Things that don't add up logically or psychologically pinch at my brain."

"I'll tell you one thing," said the halfling, beginning to study Fullmer's collection in earnest. "Your brain is certainly well connected to your mouth. On the skyship? I never saw such a thing. You were so convincing I almost believed you were Darlington Blade!" He laughed in honest appreciation. He only became serious while studying an extremely rare bottle of Jhynissian wine. "Where do you think Geerling Ambersong's body actually is, anyway?"

Pryce's words were quiet and flat. "What? You don't believe me?"

"Come along now, 'Blade,'" Gheevy stressed without interrupting his examination. "We both know who those bodies actually were—"

Pryce's next words succeeded in getting the halfling's attention. "Well, actually, that's not exactly true."

Gheevy looked at his associate in surprise, then tried to smile. "What are you talking about? We both saw Darlington Blade's corpse."

Pryce was standing just inside the door, leaning his back against the wood. "You're not listening again, Gheevy. You said we both knew who those two bodies were. To say that is not true is merely a statement of fact. / only knew who one of those bodies

was. You told me who the other one was."

"Is this ... is this another conundrum?" the halfling asked weakly.

"In a way. Sante wrote, 'Never trust what a person says, only what a person does.' Remember? You told me that yourself. You didn't attribute it to the source, but there you go."

Gheevy stood straight, his shoulders back. "I have been nothing but loyal and straightforward with you!"

"Now, now, my friend, don't get defensive. Sante also wrote,

'Never trust what a person says about another, but always trust that what he says about himself may be just the opposite.'

"I'm beginning to hate this Sante," the halfling muttered darkly.

"No need, since it seems you have read him yourself. And since Geerling Ambersong had the only complete works that I've ever seen, I wonder how it came about that you know his writings."

"Oh, for Sontoin's sake!" Gheevy erupted in exasperation. "It's only a phrase, Blade! I don't know where I got it. It's such a universal sentiment, I may have made it up. There! I made it up. Are you satisfied?"

"Well, if you want to know the truth... no."

Gheevy stared at him for a few moments, then began to laugh. "Oh, I know what this is all about," he said. 'You're feeling guilty about Dearlyn killing herself, aren't you? So now you're rooting around for some other explanation—any other explanation. You're seeing murderers everywhere, aren't you? All right, then, it's your turn to think. Because really, does it matter whose body it actually was? Gamor killed the real Darlington Blade, Dearlyn or Geerling killed him, then maybe Geerling killed himself, and Dearlyn killed Teddington. Maybe the jackals got Geerling; I don't know. I don't care! The haunt proves that Geerling is dead, so it's over! Everyone got justice, everything is taken care of, so face it. It's over. We've won. You've won! So just let it be, can't you?"

Pryce wasn't impressed. "F, Gheevy." "What?"

'Why? It's the very first, and the very last, question. Why? You want to know the biggest why in this case?"

Gheevy sighed elaborately and rolled his eyes. "All right, Blade, if you must. What is this case's biggest why?"

"I must," Pryce Covington said quietly. "The biggest why is why would a hero as famous as Darlington Blade insist on remaining unseen?"

Gheevy reacted like a talentless entertainer caught in the eye of the Lallor Gate. 'What did you say?'

"It was what was bothering me from the very outset," Pryce explained. "Why would a valiant, celebrated adventurer hide himself from his admirers? Why would a mage as beloved as Geerling Ambersong teach such a heroic figure in secret... secret even from the knowledge of his cherished daughter?" Gheevy's mouth flopped like a fish in the sand. "But—but you said—"

"My explanation was feeble even to my ears. At last year's Fall Festival, Geerling announced that Darlington Blade would appear this year to take his place as primary mage. I said that I, 'Darlington Blade,' appeared only to find my master's murderer. Of those two sources, who would you believe?"

"But—but we saw Darlington Blade's body!"

No, you saw Darlington Blade's body! I saw the body of a complete and utter stranger! A stranger who I thought had absolutely no reason to shield himself from the eyes of the residents of Lallor. So why? Why had no one—no one alive, that is—seen Darlington Blade except you?"

Gheevy Wotfirr's voice, when he finally replied, sounded different. It was no longer light or helpful or eager or friendly.

Gheevy Wotfirr's voice was now flat and deep and dangerous. "Why don't you tell me?"

Pryce Covington moved his face into a shaft of multicolored light. "Because you are Darlington Blade."

Gheevy Wotfirr didn't laugh. He didn't try to defend himself. He didn't even try to dissuade Pryce of his contention. Instead, he asked for an explanation. "How do you figure that?"

Pryce cleared his throat and leaned against the door. "It's all about fashion, really," he said diffidently. "You know what a fashion plate I am, Gheevy. I want everything to be just so.

So it really bothered me that the one thing I couldn't afford to take off or change was this cursed cloak." He fingered the clasp even now. "And while everyone treated me royally, I actually felt a tinge of jealousy that every other cloak in Lallor nearly reached the ground, while mine stopped above my knees."

Gheevy couldn't help shooting a glance at Pryce's legs. Sure enough, the bottom of the cloak ended midway down his legs.

"Think back, Gheevy," Pryce continued. "Even Dearlyn's cloak reached the ground. So why didn't the supposed matching cloak of Darlington Blade also reach the ground ... unless the real Darlington Blade was almost two feet shorter than a normal human?"

Gheevy remained silent, still holding the bottle of Jhynissian wine.

"Remember when I first fell to my knees in front of you, begging you not to give my identity away? That was the only time we ever saw eye to eye. If you wore this cloak," said Pryce, nodding with certainty, "it would reach the ground."

Pryce waited. Gheevy finally spoke. "Is that it? Is that all you've got? The length of cloak hems this season?"

Pryce looked down sadly. "Not quite. You lauded my performance on the skyship a few moments back, for which I thank you. I really couldn't have done so well had I not mixed in as much truth as I possibly could. Remember when I said a haunt's words and actions were sacrosanct in the eyes of the law? True. But interpretation is nine-tenths of the law."

"So?" Gheevy challenged. "What you said up there makes sense. Still does. The haunt jumped the wench."

Pryce shook his head again, both at the halfling's attitude and his coarsening language. "You're not asking the right why again, Gheevy. Namely, why would a mage take all the trouble to become a haunt... and then take back his dying clue? You heard him! He actually contradicted himself. He

clearly stated that Darlington Blade was the one who murdered him, then a second later added a feeble contradiction. Why, in the name of all the deities in the heavens? Why?"

"And the answer is... ?" Gheevy drawled sarcastically.

"The single best answer I can think of is fear. The same sort of fear you started to show when you thought the haunt would name you. Geerling tried, but he only knew you as Darlington Blade! He wasn't pointing at me. He was pointing at the cloak clasp! Then he realized that if he did name you, you had it in your power to kill his only child ... and whoever this strange fellow was who was now wearing the cloak. So he did what any loving parent would do in the same situation... what he had been doing for his daughter's entire life, in fact. He protected his child, while trying to provide her with a clue to the truth, all while attempting to remain in control of a dying, very recalcitrant body."

Again silence reigned in the cottage until Pryce inquired quietly, 'That's why Teddington Fullmer had to die, wasn't it? Not because he found the secret workshop. He hadn't, until you put his mortally wounded body there. It was because he was foolish enough to broach a confidence in order to gain the upper hand in a business transaction."

Gheevy looked up sharply. It was all the encouragement Pryce

needed. "You had sworn Azzo to secrecy about the length of time you had worked at his tavern, hadn't you? Remember when I confronted him about his secret on the skyship? That's what I was alluding to, Gheevy. And guess what? On the way back from Mount Talath, I took him aside and called him on it. Do you want to know what he said?"

Wotfirr's eyes were mere slits. "I have absolutely no interest in anything that fat, lovesick dog has to say."

"I'm sure the inquisitrixes would," Pryce countered, looking braver than he felt. But his anger drove him on. "He admitted to me that you promised him the finest grotto in

Lallor if he maintained that you had been working with him for years. But he had let slip—or Teddington had guessed—that you had only been stocking the liquor for a short time. I was hiding behind the cask when Teddington suggested it. You, of course, denied it with a great show of wounded pride, but you decided then and there to silence him, didn't you?" When Gheevy didn't answer, Pryce continued on inexorably. "But Fullmer, bless and curse him, told me more than just that. He said that he almost believed for a second that I was Darlington Blade. If only I had understood the subtext of both statements sooner. Namely, in the latter case, that if I could be Darlington Blade, then someone else could be, too. Namely, you."

Silence settled again, like the dissipating dust of Gamor Turkal's magic communications. Gheevy's first words in some time were flat but challenging. "So," he said. "How's your mom?"

"Unfortunately she's dead," Pryce said without pause. "Like almost everyone who truly knows you. But more to the point, opportunity and means were no problem for you, were they? Oh, no, not for the great Darlington Blade!"

"So that only leaves motive, doesn't it? What do you have to say about that, little man from Merrickarta?"

Pryce was cautioned by the obvious warning in the halfling's well-chosen words. The tide was beginning to shift, and the weight of evidence was growing ever heavier on his shoulders. But he was letting Covington know that he would not bear such overwhelming weight for long. So be it. Pryce had made himself ... and Dearlyn Ambersong... a promise.

He stepped forward, back into the light, returning the challenge directly at the murdering knave. "Don't you wonder what Greila Sontoin and I discussed in our private conversation? Everyone else does. In fact, you gave me a hint that you were interested when we first arrived here."

"All right, I'll give you that," Gheevy conceded. "I thought for certain she would disintegrate you on the spot." He left

unsaid that he had hoped for that, but the thought hung in the air anyway.

'Truth be told, so did I," Pryce agreed. "Of course, she knew I wasn't Darlington Blade, but she did know who I was. Not merely my name, but my objective, my goal in life, even my heart's true desire. I laughed off her declaration that I was a man of good intentions and an open heart, but I had to accept what Priestess Sontoin saw in me. I don't desire to brag, but she said, and I quote, You continue to live in my domain for one reason, and one reason only. For if the true spirit of the great Darlington Blade is to truly exist, it will exist in you and you alone.'"

"I think I'm going to cry," Gheevy whined with mock emotion. His next words came in an angry rush. "Are you telling me that she knew all along?"

Pryce was unfazed. "I honestly don't know, but I don't think so. She just knew that I wasn't Blade... that no one truly was the legend... not yet. But more important, Gheevy, do you know the one thing I asked her?"

"I'm not a mind reader or a priestess of unearthly wisdom!" he snarled. "I'm a halfling whose patience is rapidly coming to an end!"

"Then you shall have your answer quickly. I asked her if there was a Mystran spell to detect Derro heritage."

* * * * *

Gheevy growled slowly in the back of his throat, his sharp little teeth beginning to show. "I gather there was such a spell," he said darkly.

"If there wasn't before, you've answered my question now," Pryce assured him, moving toward the door. "All along I had to keep asking myself, 'If all my theories are correct, why is Darlington Blade doing this?' I thought I knew why Geerling Ambersong did it—it's in the teachings of Sante. He wanted to show the Council of Elders how wrong they could be when they restricted the teaching of magic. He thought magic would ultimately elevate all who learned it. That any need to

do evil would be eliminated as they gained insight, strength, and wisdom.

"But the big problem was that the council was right! Geerling Ambersong's fatal mistake was to think that Darlington Blade would be his ultimate triumph. Living proof that magnificent magic, kindly and wisely taught, even to a person who had a heritage that wished only to see humans sadistically killed and to pervert knowledge to its own dark desires, would triumph in the end."

Gheevy laughed a derisive laugh. "I just love happy endings, don't you?"

Pryce's skin crawled. Everything he had been concerned about was true. And he was facing a Derro-halfling ... one with the power of Darlington Blade. "The ending to this story is not yet written, my friend," he reminded the killer. "So who will it be written by... Gheevy Wotfirr or Darlington Blade?"

The halfling barked out a final laugh, his look and demeanor entirely changed. He now exuded strength, and there was no uncertainty or kindness in his posture or expression. "It doesn't make any difference!" he cried. "They are one and the same!" And then he started to unleash the magic Geerling Ambersong had taught him at the cost of the primary mage's own life.

The back wall exploded outward. Bottles and liquid shattered and splashed everywhere. Pryce pulled the cloak over his head and ducked down. Glass sparkled like whirring gems in the light of the exposed window. Gheevy's spell was interrupted, and suddenly the halfling was thrown back—by the power of the mongrelman's onslaught.

"Gurrahh!" Gheevy cried, falling to the floor. He rolled to the opposite wall and came up on one knee as the mongrelman continued to charge. He deflected Geoffrey's attack with a scintillating sphere spell. The energy ball appeared before him and pulsed twice. The lumbering mongrelman dodged as best he could but was caught by the edge of the second

pulse. It sent him crashing to the floor, shattering even more bottles, where he lay jerking in place.

"Is that his name?" Pryce demanded, jumping to his feet. "Gurrahh?"

Gheevy looked up, his face twisted in anger and his breath heaving. "I don't know!" he barked. "I don't care. That's what I called him because that was the stupid noise he always made!"

"I called him 'Geoffrey,' because he kept saying 'Gee-off-free,'" Pryce said with regret. "But he wasn't trying to tell me his name, was he? With his tortured, multigenetic throat, he was trying to tell me your name!"

"And as usual, you wouldn't listen!" Gheevy spat back. He slid through the spilled liquor and broken glass and gave the mongrelman a resounding kick on the side of his head. Pryce winced but held his position. An attack now would be sheer suicide. "Curse this useless hunk of hide, Gamor Turkal, and you as well!" Gheevy cried in frustration. "If Turkal had simply done his job without getting any stupid ideas, none of this would have happened!"

Pryce's stratagem worked, in a small way. So intent was Gheevy on showing off his superiority that he delayed destroying Pryce and underestimated the power of the wretched mongrelman. Gurrahh suddenly rose up, grabbing for Gheevy's legs. The halfling was too quick for the monster, though. Nimbly he hopped up to the open window Gurrahh had jumped through, stamping on the mongrelman's stomach as he went. He spun to leave the two with a killing spell, but instead he took a bottle full in the face.

No one could fault Pryce Covington's deadly accurate throwing skills.

The bottle shattered, and Gheevy flew backward out the window. The mongrelman charged after him as Pryce slipped out the front door and ran around the side. He reached the adjoining field in time to see Gheevy, wet and cut but hardly

the worse for wear, a good twenty yards ahead of him and ten yards ahead of the lumbering mongrelman.

No! Pryce thought. He couldn't let the halfling escape now. Then it would only be a waiting game to see when the vengeful creature would torture and finally kill him ... but not before he tortured and killed everyone Covington cared about.

Pryce ran as fast as he could, even moving ahead of the mongrelman, but Gheevy was faster. The halfling obviously had the same thought as Covington and was probably even now plotting the first sadistic move of an endless vengeance. To his horror, Pryce heard Gheevy laugh; then the halfling put on more speed, moving farther and farther ahead of the tiring human.

A furry blur sped past Pryce at a pace that outclassed even Wotfirr. In a matter of moments, the jackalwere was upon the halfling, snarling and tearing at his clothes. Pryce dived at the hairy, rolling, clawing bundle but was hurled back by a sudden circlet of pure white energy.

"Cunningham!" he screamed. Pryce could see the human-sized jackal within the circle, contorting in the air and howling unnaturally. Then the circle winked out, and the jackalwere

crumpled to the ground in a twisted heap.

Pryce vaulted to his feet and sprinted forward just in time to see the halfling's back at the very crest of the hill. As he ran, Pryce could see more and more of the ground beyond the top of the mound. To his amazement, he noted that the halfling was no longer running. In fact, he was just standing there, looking down at a patch of brown stevlyman and white bevittle trees.

Standing in front of the small forest was Devolawk, the broken one. Beside him, her arm around what constituted the tormented creature's shoulders, was Dearlyn Ambersong.

"I saw you die!" the halfling screeched.

"You saw me fall," she corrected vehemently. "In Halruaa, there's quite a difference."

Pryce took a quick glance back at Cunningham. He lay in a charred circle of ground, his fur burned and his skin flayed, yet the suffering jackalwere still moved. Pryce returned his attention to the guilty party. "I saw to it that another levitation field was created beneath the ship," he called to the halfling, keeping his distance. "The Mystrans collected her in a ship that flew below ours."

"They caught you?" the halfling sputtered, finally at a loss. "But why the charade?"

"I had to keep you at bay until the Ambersong legacy was safe," Pryce explained tightly. "I also had to be sure. And I had to give the inquisitrixes a solution that wouldn't threaten Dearlyn or me in the future!"

Wotfirr turned on Pryce with rancor. "Threaten? What do you mean by that?"

"You helped me, Gheevy," Pryce revealed. "By deceiving you, I was able to concoct a plan in which I would keep the inquisitrixes from finding out about Dearlyn's magical abilities by accus-

ing her of it—in a melodrama designed to trap you!"

"Trap?" the halfling blurted. "You mean the authorities still don't realize that she has... that you aren't... ?"

Pryce merely smiled and nodded knowingly. "You tricked me," the vengeful little thing seethed. "You! The dupe! The gull! Once I discovered that Gamor had contacted you, I decided that you should be the one to take the blame for the deaths. But then you had to take the cloak—the cloak that would mark Geerling Ambersong as a fraud and a fool—and set off this farce of mistaken identities!"

"My father?" Dearlyn choked. "A fraud?"

The halfling whirled on her. "My plan was perfect. Lymwich would find your father dead, in a youthful form, wearing the Darlington Blade cloak. What else could she think? Only that

your father was trying to hold on to his power by using a youth spell and pretending he was a vital new mage named Darlington Blade! They would assume that the doddering old idiot made a mistake and died in the process." The halfling grinned wickedly at her. "My killing spell was designed to leave behind that echo for Witterstaet to find ... the masterful spell I murdered Geerling Ambersong with!"

He turned so quickly and his expression was so evil that Pryce actually took a step back. "But this incredible idiot had to come along and ruin it all! I swore I would play him like the puppet he was and lead him to inexorable destruction. And so I still will." He looked back at Dearlyn with a wicked sneer, pointing at Pryce with a clawing finger. "Don't you know how he lied and used you? Don't you know what he did to your father?" He pointed at the trembling jackalwere. "He fed him to that!"

Dearlyn bit her lip, her eyes wavering. But then her shoulders straightened and she stared straight back at the depraved halfling. "He didn't want to do any of it," she said shakily.

"Nonsense!" Wotfirr roared. "All he cared about was staying alive!"

"No," she answered, her voice gaining strength. "Maybe to begin with... maybe at the start, yes." She looked at Pryce with sadness, and then something else. Something brave, even kind. "But not afterward," she maintained. "I know that for a fact" She turned to look haughtily upon her father's murderer. "You told me so yourself, halfling. In the secret workshop. 'He didn't mean it... it was an accident!'"

"Bah!" Gheevy raged. "Maybe you won't accept it, but I'm sure I'll be able to convince a certain inquisitrix that—"

"Face it, Gheevy," Pryce interrupted. "It's over. We know the whole story, and the inquisitrixes know enough not to believe you. Gamor got you enough parts to test your evil magic on and create poor Devolawk. But when none of your forbidden magic turned out well enough, you altered your

plans and used a jackalwere to find Gurrahh for you so you could secure the workshop. But Gamor even ruined that for you, by trying to double-cross you with his partners and steal it on his own."

"Gamor, that idiot!" Gheevy exploded. "I promised him the workshop when I was done with it, but he couldn't wait!"

"So he had to die, didn't he?"

"You all do!" Gheevy finally screamed, his little body shaking. "Stinking humans... always think you're so great... and you are the worst of them!" He pointed a trembling hand at Pryce. 'You're everything I hate about your kind! Smug, arrogant, stupid... think you're so smart and funny... but you're nothing... nothing!"

"You've hurt enough people, dark one," Dearlyn said. "Have you forgotten who you're dealing with? One who could arrange the Verity melodrama? One who confers with high priestesses of unearthly wisdom? You're not dealing with a petty outsider any longer. Now you're dealing with the great Darlington Blade."

Gheevy grabbed his head, arched his back, and shrieked to the treetops. "Imbecile! I'm the great Darlington Blade!" Then he unleashed his rage at the man who had ruined all his plans.

The clearing between the hilltop and the wood suddenly exploded in streams of lightning, balls of thunder, and sparks of power. Pryce dived to the side, curling into the tall grass as the mongrelman jumped forward, deflecting the nerve dance meant for Covington. The beast twisted and jerked in place as Dearlyn Ambersong hurled her staff.

Gheevy used a rapid reflexive response spell to grab the staff out of the air and hurl it back at Dearlyn. Devolawk twisted in front of her, taking the brunt of the blow as Pryce charged the halfling. But Gheevy's magic was too fast and too powerful. The halfling created a ring of disintegration and sent a six-inch circlet of annihilating matter directly at Pryce's head.

Dearlyn immediately effected a spell, raising her arm and crying "Versus petrification!" Another circlet appeared from her palm and shot over to swallow Gheevy's bead of destruction. Pryce ducked in time to feel the warring spells just barely pass over his neck.

"Blast you!" Gheevy cried. "Blast you both to the bowels of Hades!" He yanked a small, pale item from his pocket and held it up to the autumn sun.

"By Zalathorm, no!" Dearlyn cried.

"Mycontril's Last Resort," Gheevy gloated. "Nothing you can do can stop this spell. You will be eradicated in a culmination of all Ambersong magic energy!"

Pryce recognized the spell and the item. To destroy everything in a thirty-foot radius, using the power of all the remaining spells in a caster's memory, required diamond dust worth five thousand gold pieces, a pure platinum ring ... and the finger bone of an archmage.

It was Geerling's finger.

"Gheevy, no!" Pryce cried. 'You'll be hurt, too!' "But I'll survive," the enraged halfling shrieked. "Unlike all of you. All that matters is that you will finally be gone... forever!" He started the spell, nature itself reacting to the tear in reality.

The branches and tall grass bent in a powerful wind as dark storm clouds gathered above the halfling.

Pryce looked about wildly. Cunningham and Gurrahh were still down. Dearlyn was too close. There was no way any of them could get clear of the devastation in time. There was no way to escape, to stop him, or to distract him, except—

The voice of Geerling Ambersong sounded on the howling wind. "Darlington Blade!"

Dearlyn looked around wildly. "Father?..."

"Darlington Blade!"

The voice was so unearthly and so real that even Gheevy froze in his casting. "M-Master?" he stuttered despite himself.

"Darlington Blade," Geerling Ambersong called.

A fingered wing touched Dearlyn's arm and moved her aside. Devolawk, the broken one, trudged forward, his snout-beak all the way open, his corpse teeth and mangled lips making the sounds. "Darlington Blade... you must not do this____"

"The haunt," Pryce whispered.

The spirit of Geerling Ambersong was back. It was near because of Cunningham. The Haunt had been traveling with the jackalwere because of Pryce's horrible previous payment to the jackals in exchange for his first clues.

"M-Master?" Gheevy repeated, startled, but then restarted his spell. "No, not my master! / am the master here! You fool, thinking your magic could cure me. There is nothing to cure! You deserved to die! All humans deserve to die!"

"No, Darlington, no!" the haunt cried, his winged arms held high.

Pryce looked from the halfling to the woman to the broken one. All three began to move at once. Each was starting a spell, but unless Pryce did something, the halfling would finish first... and then they all would be finished.

Pryce Covington went up on one leg, curled one arm, tightened his fist, and swung his arm under and around.

"Gheevy!" he

cried. "Crystal Orb!"

The halfling glanced over without slowing his movements.

"Idiot! You have no magic!" But then he saw a small glowing ball shoot from Pryce's sleeve and speed toward his face. Gheevy immediately lost his stance, lost his movements, and stumbled over the necessary spell words.

The illumination ball—the one Pryce palmed when Gheevy had dropped it after the outside wall of the workshop first swung open—bounced harmlessly off Wotfirr's upraised arm. The halfling stared incredulously down at it, then looked up, openmouthed, at a grinning Pryce. "Well, what do you know?" Covington said pointedly. "You're right."

That's when the combined might of the Ambersong father

and daughter erupted from the forest and smashed into the infuriated halfling.

Dearlyn's entire arms were consumed by a fiery white, which sped across the fifteen feet separating her from Wotfirr, but even those beams of destruction couldn't rival the power displayed by Devolawk. From every finger, every claw, and from under every feather came a bolt, stream, circlet, orb, or blast. They sliced, stabbed, encircled, grabbed, and smashed into Gheevy, making the halfling dance wildly in place, as if the deities themselves had each taken a limb and shook it.

Through this wash of color and power came Dearlyn's beams, which crashed into the halfling like the waves of a tsunami, engulfing him.

Pryce fell back, shielding his eyes, and quickly crawled over to where the mongrelman and Cunningham lay. In seconds, it was over. Darlington Blade was dead. Long live Darlington Blade.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Blade to Rest

All that was left was to bury the dead.

The mongrelman rose slowly. The jackalwere did not.

"Cunningham," Pryce said sadly, leaning over the torn creature. As he looked down at the burned figure, who was caught between his human and animal state, he found that he had a lump in his throat.

"Ah," the jackalwere managed to croak. "My dear fellow... please, do not mourn for the likes of me_____"

But Pryce would not leave it at that. "Though you are a monster," he said softly, "this is not a monstrous thing you have done."

The jackalwere managed a feeble laugh. "Oh, I know you, my good man. You would have been foolish enough to release me... to let me go with my children ... but I ask you—you whom I would call my friend—how many innocent travelers would have been condemned to death by your

kind action?"

He raised a paw that was partly a hand and touched Pryce's face. "Stupid, ignorant, unaware travelers to be sure," he said, "but innocent nonetheless."

Pryce chuckled painfully, blinking away moisture. "Travel well, you whom I would call my friend. Run fast in the sleep that knows only peace."

Cunningham smiled. "I will watch over my children from that place," he promised. "And every moment I will bless the fact that they have no human consciousness ... to make them do anything so foolish as to care." Then he was gone.

Pryce stood and turned to the mongrelman, who was weeping openly and unashamedly. Pryce put his arm around the thing, and they walked toward the wood. They stopped only to look down at the charred, curled remains of what had once been Gheevy Wotfirr ... and perhaps even Darlington Blade. There was really nothing left. Even now the wind was blowing what ashes there were in every different direction.

Pryce moved on to where Dearlyn held the crumpled Devolawk in her arms. "It was too much for him," she said.

"His internal organs must be as piecemeal as his exterior," Pryce realized. "The strain must have almost torn him apart." He knelt down beside the creature that was part vole, part hawk, and part resurrected corpse. "Devolawk? Is there anything we can do?"

The human part of his eyelids fluttered while the hawk parts cleared and slid back. He tried to open his snout-bill, but could only burble one word. "Fly?"

Pryce put his hand on where the creature's torn and twisted heart must be. "Yes, you will fly again, and rest in the earth. Soon. No more pain, my friend."

Incredibly the broken one shifted in Dearlyn's arms, one appendage straining for the sky, the other gripping the ground. "Freeeee!" he wailed before gladly dying.

Dearlyn looked up at Pryce and the mongrelman. Then she cradled the pathetic, but somehow noble, form of the dead

bro-

ken one, lowered her head, and cried for him ... as well as for her father.

"His fear in the workshop made me wonder all the more," Pryce said as he walked deeper into the caverns beneath the city. "Then I remembered that he hid behind Dearlyn's cloak and held the illumination orb directly in front of his face. I realized later that his action would have kept you from seeing his face and trying once again to tell me what I had so patently ignored earlier."

The mongrelman grunted, bumping Pryce with what served as his hip. It was his way of saying 'That's all right'—a method that had often come into play on the long trip back to the hidden caverns near the Question Tree. It was easier for the mongrelman to do that than to try to talk.

They reached a fork in the caves, a place where in one direction lay the entry behind Schreders At Your Service. And in the other direction? Only the mongrelman knew.

"Gurrahh?" Pryce asked. "Are you sure that's an accurate pronunciation of your real name? Or are you trying to tell me something else I'm ignoring?"

"Grrrrraughh!" the mongrelman replied, nodding its huge head. "Gurauggh."

'Take all the time you need,' Pryce advised, listening intently. "It's no trouble. Believe me, I know what it's like to have everyone get your name wrong!"

The mongrelman made the noise again and again until Pryce said "Gurauggh." Then the beast nodded avidly. "Gurauggh," Pryce said again, locking the pronunciation into his brain. "It's that extra g that does it, eh?" The mongrelman lifted his hand and pushed his lip back to create a lopsided smile.

Pryce laughed in honest appreciation. "So, Gurauggh, will you look for more of your kind? Return from whence you came?"

The mongrelman glanced at both tunnel openings, then looked back at Pryce with a helpless shrug.

Covington leaned in and spoke with conviction. "You could come with me, you know... back into the light. We have much to learn from each other. I want to know your language so I never make such an egregious mistake again." The mongrelman looked at him doubtfully. "This is indeed a shining region, Gurauggh," Pryce assured him, "truly the hidden jewel of Halruaa, where all creatures can be accepted and at home, if they are willing to try."

Even a twisted, horrible, resentful creature who was plotting a terrible revenge against a society that wasn't even given a chance to accept him.

One glistening tear was the answer to Covington's invitation. He listened carefully as the poor thing shambled into the darkness of the other tunnel. He waited until the mongrelman was completely out of sight, then turned to go.

"I... will... re... mem... ber," he heard from the blackness.

"As I will remember you," he quietly promised.

"So, Darlington Blade," a patiently waiting Berridge Lymwich said as he stepped out of the renovated cave entrance behind Schreders's restaurant. She handed him a brew and raised a tankard of her own. "I hope this strange welcome won't chase you away from Lallor."

"You mean this one right now," a surprised—not altogether pleased—Pryce asked, looking dubiously at the liquid, "or discovering that Gheevy Wotfir was plotting against me and my master?"

The inquisitrix laughed, a bit stridently, but continued, all hale and hearty. "Well, everything's been put to right. Don't you worry on that score. The Mystra Superior herself did the incan-

tations over the halfling's remains. And, while I'm still a bit perplexed as to why you needed to confront him alone when all of Lallor was at your service, Priestess Sontoin herself

assures us that if you say it's in the interest of national security, then it is. So"—she raised her glass to him—"here's to proving yourself... with a vengeance!"

Pryce tapped the bottom of his glass against the top of her proffered one, then waited until she finished drinking before handing back his untouched brew. "Have another," he suggested. "On me." Then he quickly slipped out of the alley to the street, leaving a repentant, anxious, and apprehensive inquisitrix with her hands full.

Dearlyn Ambersong stood before the fireplace when he entered the Ambersong dwelling. She had built a fire and wore an amazing scarlet and jade gown of velvet, with a golden-laced bodice. Her hair hung free, and the heat from the flames made it shimmy like a Halabar dancer.

He looked quickly around to spot her red horsehair staff and was relieved to see it in the corner, far from her grip. "Good evening, Miss Ambersong," he said tentatively, feeling the residence welcoming him, but wondering about the feelings of his host.

She stood, one arm on the mantelpiece, looking deep into the fire. "Good evening," she replied, pointedly not concluding the greeting with a name. She didn't look up from the fascination of the flames even as he moved to the center of the room. He grew still when she spoke again. "You know," she said, her voice throaty, "I really didn't know what I was going to do until you actually accused me on the skyship."

"I figured," he said quietly, moving toward the chair she had once knocked him into.

"Of course, I hardly believed you when you told me your plan in the workshop while the halfling was doing your bidding with the inquisitrixes."

"I could see that," he told her. "I hated to do it so soon after — after all that had happened, but there was no other time." She still didn't look up from the fire. "I think I hated you then

... for your deceptions and lies and machinations... but I could still see your passion and, more importantly, your compassion. You were as trapped in this plot as I was. More so, in fact, because it was truly your life at stake." Finally she looked up at him, his eyes filling with hers.

"I knew I had to take a leap of faith," she said, almost smiling, "both to trust you... and to jump from the ship."

"Which you did," he said, overcome with her courage, understanding, and beauty. "Magnificently. Both, I mean. Trusting and jumping."

She stepped forward, turning her extraordinarily intelligent and insightful face up to him. "I almost didn't," she revealed. "But only when you were struck by lightning. I thought... I was afraid you might be dead."

He smiled kindly at her, fingering the cloak clasp. "Your father saw to it that I wasn't. He was looking out for me ... for both of us."

Tears began to move down both her smooth, clear cheeks. "As ... as Devolawk lay in my arms... before you came over to us... my father spoke to me."

Pryce stood straight, his face showing concern, but only for her feelings.

"He swore you were a good man. He said he loved me. Then he was gone."

She lowered her head and closed her eyes, although the tears were flowing freely now. When she opened her eyes again, he was holding her. She wrapped her own arms around him and held on for dear life.

"Even Greila Sontoin herself said I should trust you," she said as she rested her head against his chest. "That you had a clear eye, good intentions, and a sharp wit." His cloak clasp was right against her ear. She looked up at him. "But who are you, really?" she asked with emotion.

Pryce opened his mouth to speak but could say nothing. He was born with the name Pryce Covington, but he really wasn't that person anymore. But neither was he the real

Darlington Blade. But then again, who was? The person Geerling Ambersong wanted the halfling to be, or the truly evil halfling himself? Or was it the legend Gamor Turkal had created in Lallor... the man who Greila Sontoin wanted him to be?

Finally he looked down at her, seeing his reflection in her eyes. That gave him all the strength he needed. "We cannot see our own faces," he said, paraphrasing the first words he had ever spoken to her. "So I am truly whoever you see."

She kissed him, holding the back of his head and filling his mind with an ardor that reduced the kiss of Chimera in the Mys-tran castle to what it had truly been... an illusion.

"Thank you," she finally said softly. "Thank you for avenging my father's death and making things right... Darling."

He smiled down at her, happier than he had ever been in his life. "You're welcome," he said. "Dear."

They stood that way for a long time, until the blazing fire diminished to a slow and steady heat.

"You know," she finally said, "there are still many mysteries in this city ... mysteries that may require the clear eye and the sharp wit of a man with good intentions... but also the magic of the Ambersongs."

"That's true," he admitted. "But you are not a man of good intentions."

She laughed. "And you," she reminded him, "are no Ambersong magician." Pryce considered the odds. Without her, his lack of magical

knowledge would soon become apparent. But without him, her magical knowledge would soon be discovered, melodrama or no melodrama.

He could make a show of teaching her, he supposed, but that would take time... time to enjoy the plush surroundings and infinite respect of Lallor. It certainly seemed like a cushy job... if not for life, then near enough.

Then he considered Dearlyn Ambersong. She was indeed cushy, certainly courageous, and most definitely

interesting... but he had better watch out for the sharp edges of her magic and her gardening implements.

Mustering all his wit and strength, he finally came up with a totally logical reply: a massive, spine-stretching yawn.

"My goodness," she said, letting him go and stepping back.

"Have you slept at all since your arrival in Lallor?"

"Well, actually," he drawled slowly, "except for some time unconscious from a head wound... no."

"You must be exhausted!" she exclaimed, hurriedly moving toward the sleeping quarters and beckoning him to follow.

Pryce stood in the main room dreamily. He suddenly realized that he had been called a good man by no less a source than Hal-ruaa's highest priestess and even the haunt of Labor's primary mage. And at this point, he would accept being a good man over being a great Blade. While he might have quibbled with everyone's Pryce estimate in the past, he now had to admit he had reason to be pleased.

After all, he had actually resolved a puzzle that was unique in the history of the mystery. A murder conundrum in which the victim, the killer, and the detective were all the same man.

He had solved his own murder in Halruaa, as it were.

Pryce wandered slowly over to the sleeping quarters, taking off his cloak as he went. He leaned on the door and watched Dearlyn turn back the bedcovers.

"This is only temporary, of course," she said to him quickly.

"You'll have your own room soon." He resisted the temptation to express his disappointment, but she continued regardless. "Father would have wanted it that way. To tell you the truth, I miss having someone to cook for... it's sometimes so sad to cook for one. And I can help you understand father's work, and we can oversee the inventory of father's workshop, and—"

Darlington Blade drowsily put his forefinger to his lips with one hand and waved her back with the other. "Moot," he said, trudging forward. "All moot until I awake. Besides," he

concluded, standing beside her radiance amidst the most wonderful house he had ever known, "I still have to see whether or not this is all really a dream."

Dearlyn Ambersong smiled widely at him, anchoring him with a look that promised many interesting moments. "No," she said. "It's no dream. But thanks to you, at least the nightmare is over."

He wavered in place for a moment, then gave the bed a sleepy smile. 'Ah, well," he said, "that's just the Pryce you have to pay."

He was happily asleep even before she gently covered him with Darlington Blade's cloak.